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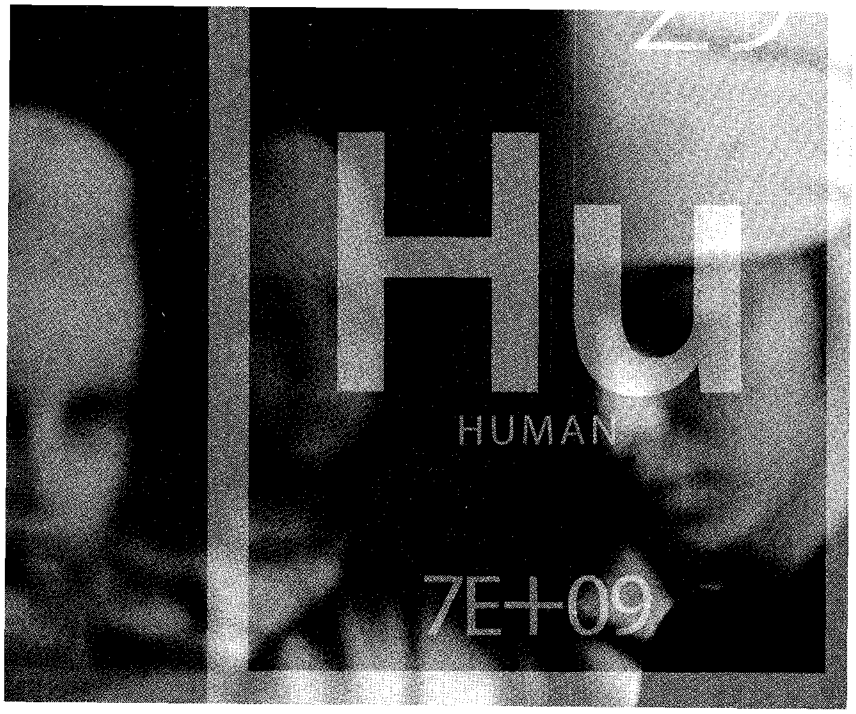
THE NEW YORKER

AUG. 25, 2008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AUGUST 25, 2008

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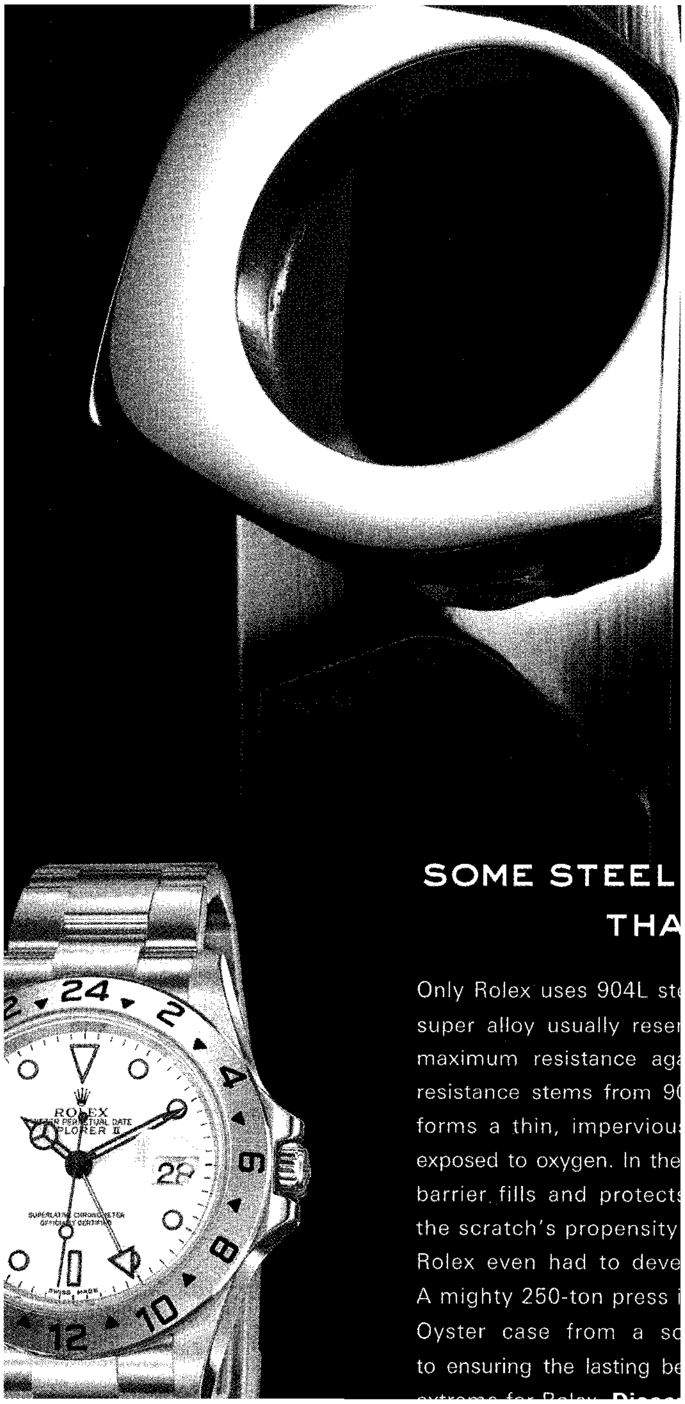
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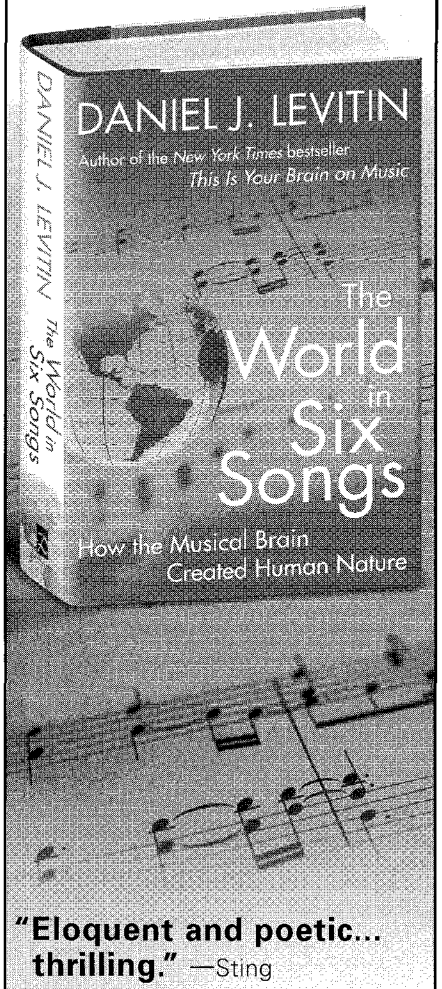
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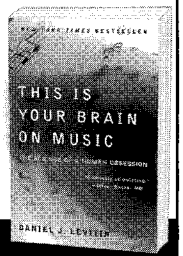

CONTRIBUTORS

George Packer ("Drowning," p. 40) is the editor of two volumes of George Orwell's essays, "Facing Unpleasant Facts" and "All Art Is Propaganda," which will be published in October. His play "Betrayed" won the 2008 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play.

Anthony Lane ("The Only Games in Town," p. 26; The Current Cinema, p. 84) is a staff writer and a film critic for the magazine.

John Kenney (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 31) has been contributing humor pieces to the magazine since 1999.

John Adams ("Sonic Youth," p. 32) received the 2003 Pulitzer Prize in Music for his orchestral work "On the Transmigration of Souls." This fall, he will publish "Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life," a memoir, and his opera "Doctor Atomic" will have its Metropolitan Opera première.

Richard Rayner (The Talk of the Town, p. 23) is the author of, most recently, "The Associates: Four Capitalists Who Created California."

C. K. Stead (Poem, p. 54) is a poet, novelist, and critic. "The Black River" is his latest collection of poems.

Nick Paumgarten ("A Greenwich of the Mind," p. 56) has been writing for the magazine since 2000.

Mahmoud Darwish (Poem, p. 61), the Palestinian poet, who died this month, was the author of more than twenty volumes of poetry in Arabic. His most recent collections in English translation are "Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?" and "The Butterfly's Burden."

Tobias Wolff (Fiction, p. 66) recently published "Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories."

Alex Ross (Musical Events, p. 74) won the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism for "The Rest Is Noise," which comes out in paperback in October.

Paul Goldberger (The Talk of the Town, p. 25; The Sky Line, p. 70) is the magazine's architecture critic.

Joan Acocella (Books, p. 76) reviews books and dance for the magazine. Her collection of essays "Twenty-eight Artists and Two Saints" is available in paperback.

Richard McGuire (Cover) has an animated film, "Fear(s) of the Dark," coming out in October.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

Ask the Author: *George Packer* takes readers' questions about Burma, and offers posts and links on his blog, Interesting Times. / Blogs by *Hendrik Hertzberg*, *Dana Goodyear*, and *Sasha Frere-Jones*, plus the Book Bench, the Cartoon Lounge, and Goings On. / The New Yorker Out Loud: *John Adams* talks about becoming a composer. / The Naked Campaign videos, featuring *Steve Brodner.* / From the archives: *Alex Ross* on John Adams, *Cynthia Gorney* on Natalie Coughlin, and complete coverage of the Presidential campaign. / Animated cartoons, the caption contest, and a list of *New Yorker* events.

THE MAIL

LAWS AND MORALS

It may be that Arthur Bentley's "The Process of Government" fell out of favor in the idealistic sixties because, as Nicholas Lemann writes, "reform was again in the air and impatience with traditional forms of politics was on the rise" (A Critic at Large, August 11th & 18th). It may also be that even though the book's model explained the plurality, or even the majority, of variance in political behavior, it left out crucial motivating factors. For instance, ideas alone sometimes drive behavior, occasionally obsessively. For some individuals and groups, an idea becomes so important that it emerges as the impervious hegemonic motivating factor in their lives. It is true, as Lemann suggests, that governments and groups have traditionally invoked morality as a cover for self-interest. However, in our increasingly post-industrial age, morality is becoming a significant autonomous political force.

Gerald Beroldi
Chicago, Ill.

LOOKING BACK

Charles Van Doren describes a Shakespeare quote that his father gave him as a consolation after the quiz-show scandal was revealed ("All the Answers," July 28th). The line is from "Twelfth Night": "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." Van Doren accurately attributes this to the character of Feste the fool, but he calls him a "mean-spirited clown," seeming to conflate the wise and enigmatic fool with the pedantic, stringent servant Malvolio, whose last, foreboding line is "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you." Van Doren goes on to speculate that "the play's audience knows that somehow he will survive and live to taunt some other master." Once the curtain falls, though, we don't know what will happen to Malvolio, or Feste, or any character—they do not get the chance to publish their own side of the story many years later.

Matthew Brown
Manchester, Mass.

Van Doren was my freshman English-composition instructor at Columbia University in 1955. He taught me how to write and also how to read. During his moment of celebrity, a wag wrote on Charlie's blackboard, "For $64,000, what is beauty?" That was Columbia, that was Charlie. Charlie came to our fortieth class reunion, in 1999, the only time he came back to campus after his resignation, except for his son's graduation. We made him an honorary member of the Class of 1959. He spoke of the Greeks and of Virgil's Aeneid and told us that the theme was "Do not scorn the gods." We understood his message and shed tears together at his mea culpa.

Daniel Ein
Washington, D.C.

KID LIT

As a librarian at the New York Public Library for five years, I can confirm that Anne Carroll Moore's grip on the library, as Jill Lepore describes it, is still firm ("The Lion and the Mouse," July 21st). What Moore did to create a children's library can never be diminished, and libraries are now a safe, free, and educational haven for many children. But her most significant legacy, for many children's librarians and collections managers within the N.Y.P.L., is a tendency to determine what a child "should" read without necessarily considering what a child wants to read. We need to remember that children have opinions, and that those opinions count for something. Unfortunately, many people who work with children forget this.

Amy Patrick
Brooklyn, N.Y.

•

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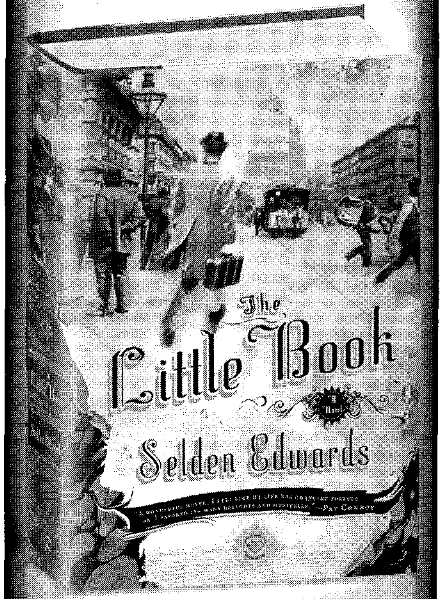

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"Movies Under the Stars," at Riverside Park South. Photograph by Yola Monakhov.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
24	25	26	20	21	22	23

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
DAYS OF SUMMER

Signature Theatre Company has dedicated its 2008-09 season to the work of the Negro Ensemble Company, a New York-based troupe founded in 1967 by Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks, and Gerald Krone to explore themes in black-American life. In Leslie Lee's 1975 drama, "The First Breeze of Summer," family members gather to celebrate the birthday of their matriarch (Leslie Uggams). Ruben Santiago-Hudson directs. (See page 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
GOING DRY

The final free concert in McCarren Park Pool (at least until after the restoration of the pool, which is slated to begin this fall) features the indie-rock elder statesmen Yo La Tengo, the up-and-coming New Jersey punk act Titus Andronicus, and the English dance-music sensation Ebony Bones. (See page 9.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
LAST CALL

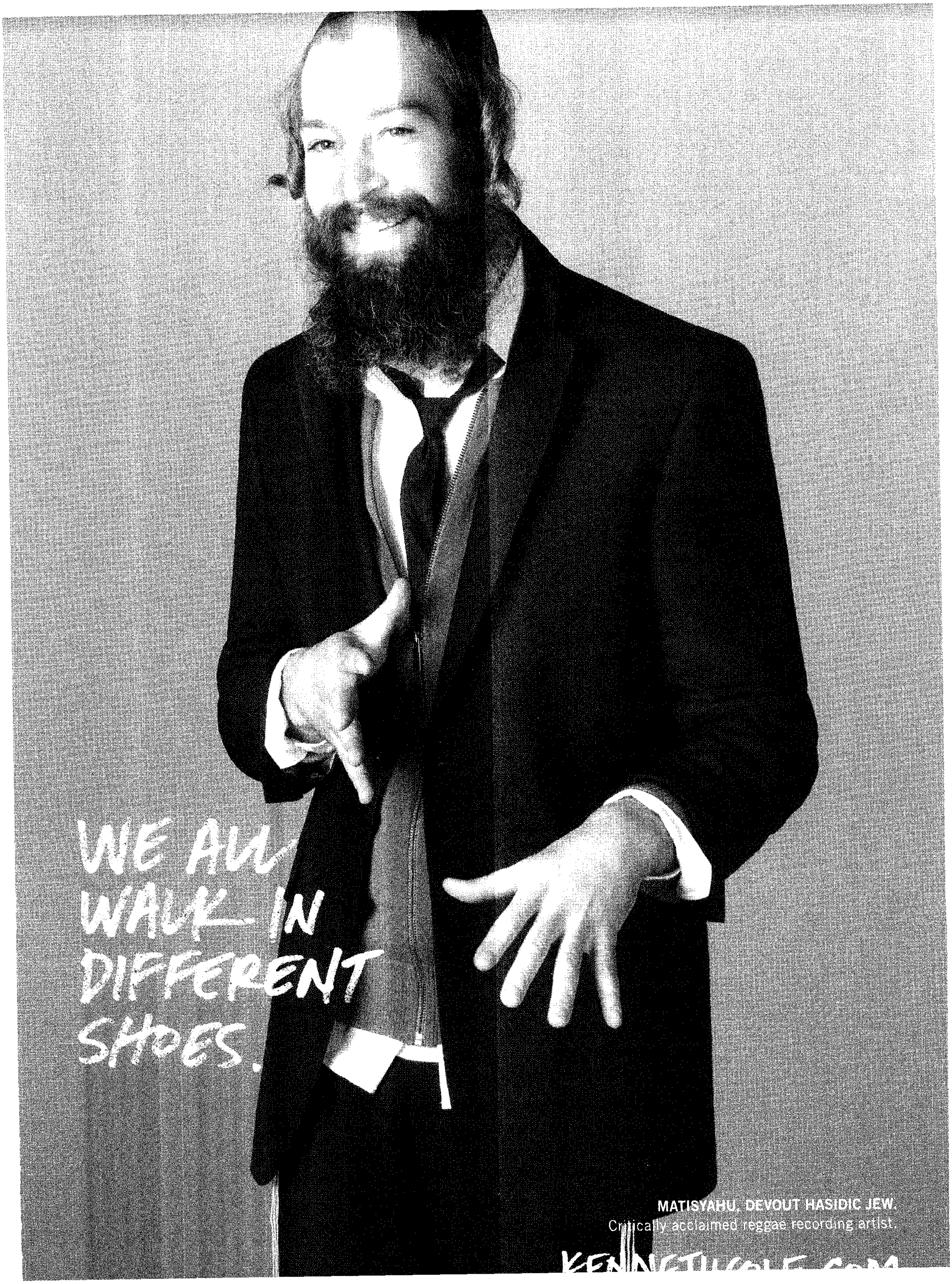
The Beaux Arts Trio—the finest piano trio in the world, bar none—is retiring next month. It gives its final American performances this week at Tanglewood, where the group was founded more than fifty years ago. (See page 14.)

MOVIES
ASTRIDE THE BORDER

The Mexican director Roberto Gavaldón, whose career spanned forty-six years, is best known for his brooding, romantic thrillers, but he also directed an English-language movie for Disney in 1955, "The Littlest Outlaw." It will be screened at Walter Reade along with eight other films by the director, including "The Other One," starring Dolores del Rio in a double role. (See page 18.)

READINGS AND TALKS
WHEN IN ROME

Centuries before the words "weekend" or "vacation," the ancient Romans had *otium*, meaning "leisure." Visitors to the Metropolitan Museum can learn more during a lecture on the concept, its relation to luxury, and its impact on artistic production in the early days of the empire. (See page 18.)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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

FELA!
Bill T. Jones directs and choreographs a new musical about the Nigerian composer, performer, and political activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti. With a book by Jim Lewis and Jones and additional lyrics by Lewis. Kuti's music will be performed by Antibalas. In previews. (37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-560-8912.)

THE FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER
Signature Theatre Company presents Leslie Lee's drama from 1975, about three generations of a black family. Ruben Santiago-Hudson directs; Leslie Uggams stars. In previews. Opens Aug. 21. (555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

A TALE OF TWO CITIES
Jill Santoriello wrote the book, music, and lyrics for this musical adaptation of the Dickens novel. Warren Carlyle directs and choreographs. In previews. (Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

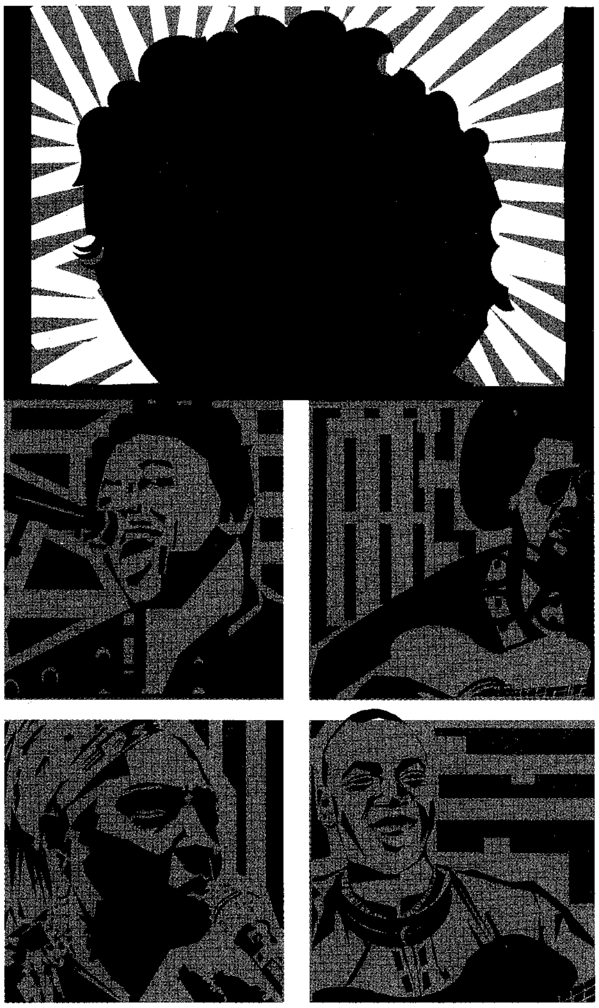
THREE CHANGES
Playwrights Horizons kicks off its season with the world première of a play by Nicky Silver, about an Upper West Side couple who get a visit from the man's Hollywood-based brother. Wilson Milam ("The Lieutenant of Inishmore") directs. Starring Aya Cash, Scott Cohen, Dylan McDermott, Brian J. Smith, and Maura Tierney. Previews begin Aug. 22. (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

NOW PLAYING

ABSINTHE
The Spiegeltent's headlining event—a raunchy circus full of erotically charged acrobatics and variety acts—returns for its third year. Many of last summer's performers are back, including the Gazillionaire, an impresario with a gold tooth and a giant crotch, and the downtown burlesque sprite Julie Atlas Muz: if you haven't seen her climb full-body into a balloon, now's your chance. Audience members in the first row are likely to be groped by a drunken chanteuse by the name of Kaye Tuckerman. But the evening's most winning performers aren't even of boozing age: the Anastasini brothers, the elder of whom is able to kick the younger (a toothy ten-year-old) in circles like a load of laundry. (South Street Seaport, Pier 17. 212-279-4200.)

ANIMALS OUT OF PAPER
Attempting to stave off a crippling depression, the world-famous origamist Ilana Andrews (Kellie Overbey) agrees to apprentice Suresh, a paper-folding prodigy (Utkarsh Ambudkar), at the behest of his calculus teacher, Andy (Jeremy Shamos), an awkward amateur origami enthusiast who also happens to be in love with her. When Ilana chooses to return Andy's sentiments, either out of desperation or desire, things in her already messy life get even messier, feelings are hurt, and hearts get creased, if not broken. Rajiv Joseph has crafted a winning if patchy drama about art, love, memory, and fragility, full of subtle symbolism and hitting such an impressive array of stirring notes that, by the end, one can easily forgive the clunkiness of the first third of this delightful piece. Joseph is a playwright to watch. (McGinn/Cazale, Broadway at 76th St. 212-246-4422. Through Aug. 24.)

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS
Five actors deftly portray more than thirty different characters in this enjoyable stage adaptation of Jules Verne's 1873 adventure novel about Phineas Fogg (Daniel Stewart), an English gentleman who attempts to circumnavigate the globe in less than three months. The playwright, Mark Brown, has done a polished if not entirely rigorous job with the adaptation, which moves well but can occasionally veer toward the cartoonish. The true wonder in this production lies somewhere between the clever, minimalist direction, by Michael Evan Haney, and the live sound design, by David Andrew Levy, which together manage to evoke the story's many exotic settings with subtlety, economy, and verve—a riveting testament to the ingeniousness of the human imagination, truly in keeping with the spirit of Verne himself. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)



A tribute to James Brown, at Lincoln Center Out of Doors.

KIM DEMARCO

BUFFALO GAL
A. R. Gurney's latest, set in his native Buffalo, begins when a Waspy television star (Susan Sullivan, in Katharine Hepburn mode) returns to tread the home-town boards in a regional production of "The Cherry Orchard." The ensuing backstage drama is oddly bloodless; this is really a character study—and a rather plodding one—of a second-rate diva who lacks both the mystery and acidity of her Chekhovian predecessors. The play is nudged along by predictable subplots (a competing job offer, an old flame) and laced with shopworn odes to the communitarian spirit of The Theatre, delivered by an eager-beaver intern (Carmen M. Herlihy). Mark Lamos's musty production does capture a certain small-city lassitude, that feeling of waiting for the circus to come to town. Unfortunately, in Gurney's monochrome portrait, the big moment never arrives. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

A DAY IN DIG NATION
Michael McQuilken wrote (with Tommy Smith) and performs this one-man show, about the pitfalls of a technology-driven society. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Through Aug. 23.)

HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE ROCK MUSICAL
Since it stormed the Public Theatre in 1967, James Rado, Gerome Ragni, and Galt MacDermot's musical has become as much of a cultural artifact as the mood ring, so it's a daunting show to revive. Diane Paulus's production succeeds by keeping the highs high—try to resist Will Swenson, as Berger, climbing over your seat in a fringed loincloth—but even more so by tapping into the core of ambivalence that makes "Hair" more than a hippie Renaissance fair. By the time the audience is invited to rush the stage for "Let the Sun Shine In," we know what's fuelling this far-out dance party: the dread, the heartache, and the terror-stricken defiance of the draft-card era. (Delacorte Theatre, Central Park, near W. 81st St. For information about free tickets, which are required, call 212-539-8750.)

HAMLET
Gorilla Rep presents a free production of the Shakespeare tragedy on the Cloisters Lawn, at Fort Tryon Park. Christopher Carter Sanderson directs. (190th St. at Broadway. For more information, visit www.gorillarep.org.)

MISALLIANCE
New York Classical Theatre, which presents peripatetic productions in Central Park, puts on Shaw's play from 1909, a satire of marriage, involving the daughter of a wealthy underwear manufacturer. (Enter at Central Park W. at W. 103rd St. 212-252-4531. Through Aug. 24.)

NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL FRINGE FESTIVAL
More than two hundred companies perform shows in twenty venues across downtown Manhattan. Highlights include Working Man's Clothes and Desiree Burch's "52 Man Pickup," Carol Lempert's "That Dorothy Parker," Patrick Huguenin's "Paper Dolls," Ryan Iverson and Scott Peterman's "Sailor Man," and Mark Brown's musical "China: The Whole Enchilada." (Various venues. 212-279-4488. For more information, visit www.fringenyc.org. Through Aug. 24.)

THE SEDUCTION OF EDGAR DEGAS
The première of a play by Le Wilhelm, about Degas and his muse, the Parisian dancer Eugénie Fiocre. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

SPIEGELWORLD 2008
The Spiegeltent returns to South Street Seaport, featuring several shows, including the première of "Désir," as well as a new incarnation of last year's "Absinthe" (see above). (Pier 17. 212-279-4200.)

[TITLE OF SHOW]
A meta-musical about two guys trying to write a musical may sound suspect, but the result, with a book by Hunter Bell and music and lyrics by Jeff Bowen, who also star, turns out to be a joy from start to finish—original, clever, and surprisingly moving. Bell and Bowen, joined by their actress friends (and now co-stars) Susan Blackwell and Heidi Blickenstaff, create a musical in three weeks and submit it to a festival; brainstorming sessions, foulmouthed pep talks, jokes about drag-queen names and Broadway flops, and an in-song argument about whether "sweeter" rhymes with "theatre" all make it into the show, as does each new chapter in its progression from idea to possible hit. That we know the ending—we're watching it on Broadway—only heightens the fun. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

TWELFTH NIGHT
Pulse Ensemble Theatre presents a free production of the Shakespeare comedy at the Amphitheatre in Riverbank State Park. Alexa Kelly directs. (Enter on 145th St. at Riverside Dr. 212-695-1596. Through Aug. 24.)

OUT OF TOWN

BAY STREET THEATRE
Marcia Milgrom Dodge directs "Ain't Misbehavin'," the Fats Waller musical revue by Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby, Jr. For more information, visit www.baystreet.org. (Sag Harbor, N.Y. 631-725-9500.)

BERKSHIRE THEATRE FESTIVAL
At the Unicorn, Anders Cato directs Beckett's 1953 masterwork, "Waiting for Godot," through Aug. 23. "Noël Coward in Two Keys," Coward's final play, continues performances on the Main Stage. For more information, visit www.berkshiretheatre.org. (Stockbridge, Mass. 413-298-5576.)

DOUBLE EDGE THEATRE
The company presents "The Illustrious Return of Don Quixote," an adaptation of Cervantes's novel that includes puppets, stilts, and scenes both indoors and outside, through Aug. 23. (948 Conway Rd., Ashfield, Mass. 413-628-0277.)

HUDSON VALLEY SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL
"Cymbeline," directed by Terrence O'Brien, plays on the tented outdoor stage at Boscobel, in repertory with "Twelfth Night" and "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)." For more information, visit www.hvshakespeare.org. (Garrison, N.Y. 845-265-9575.)

WILLIAMSTOWN THEATRE FESTIVAL
On the Main Stage, Joseph Hardy directs "Home," a drama by David Storey, starring Richard Easton and Dana Ivey, through Aug. 24. For a full schedule, visit www.wtfestival.org. (Williamstown, Mass. 413-597-3400.)

Also Playing

ARIAS WITH A TWIST: HERE Arts Center, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101. **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BOEING-BOEING:** Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **CIRQUE DREAMS "JUNGLE FANTASY":** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200. Through Aug. 24. **EAST 14TH:** New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **GYPSY:** St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **LEGALLY BLONDE THE MUSICAL:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4100. **LIFE IN A MARITAL INSTITUTION:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **THE MARRIAGE OF BETTE AND BOO:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **THE 39 STEPS:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100 **XANADU:** Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Aug. 21: **Bobby (Blue) Bland,** B. B. King's longtime touring partner, lends some authenticity to this Times Square club. Aug. 22: **Black Dog,** a Led Zeppelin tribute band, leads a belated Robert Plant birthday celebration. Aug. 23: The smooth R. & B. of **En Vogue.** Aug. 24: Helsinki's **Finntroll** gamely spices its death metal with traditional Finnish folk elements and—wait for it—bits of polka. They're touring in the company of the combative California thrash-metal group **Warbringer.**

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Aug. 26: The local favorites **Nada Surf** perform an acoustic set in support of their friend and fellow-musician Frank Bango, who is recovering from treatment for cancer. With **Dean & Britta** (see the Zipper Factory Theatre), the singer-songwriter **Richard Buckner,** and **Sam Champion** (the band, not the weatherman).

HIRO BALLROOM
The Maritime Hotel, 371 W. 16th St. (212-260-4700)—Aug. 23: Initially a somewhat gimmick-driven, all-girl band, New York's **Rasputina** eschewed conventional rock instrumentation in favor of cellos and presented its cheekily maudlin chamber rock while dressed in Victorian finery. After a series of well-received albums, Rasputina has proven itself to be more than simply a one-joke corseted goth band. It is currently a power trio, and for the first time in its seventeen-year history Rasputina has a man in the fold.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Aug. 26: The **Asylum Street Spankers,** a long-standing free-wheeling acoustic-music group from Austin, Texas.

JONES BEACH THEATRE
Wantagh, N.Y. (212-307-7171)—Aug. 22: The synth-pop pioneers the **Human League** (best remembered for their heart-rending he-said/she-said anthem, "Don't You Want Me"), the former Go-Go's lead singer, **Belinda Carlisle,** and **A Flock of Seagulls.**

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3132)—Aug. 22: The outspoken rapper **Jean Grae** was born Tsidi Ibrahim in South Africa, the daughter of the legendary jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, but she was raised in New York City. She's an integral part of the multi-borough hip-hop scene, so much so that she's known as the "cameo queen" for her numerous guest spots on albums by local performers. Aug. 24: **Faun Fables,** the brainchild of the extraordinary Oakland-based singer and yodeler Dawn McCarthy, deliver eerie, Appalachian-tinged songs marked by spellbinding honesty. McCarthy, one of the most gifted singers performing today, and her group (highlighted by the playing of her multitalented musical partner Nils Frykdahl) suggest what the next world might sound like.

LINCOLN CENTER OUT OF DOORS
Aug. 20: Ethiopian jazz-pop fusion gets a grand showing when the legendary vocalists **Mahmoud Ahmed** and **Alèmayèhu Eshèté** hook up with Boston's adoring **Either/Orchestra,** and the saxophonist **Gétatchèw Mèkurya** unites with the Dutch avant-punk band, the **Ex.** Aug. 22: An African tribute to James Brown, organized by **Pee Wee Ellis** and **Fred Wesley** (the architects of Brown's funky sound back in the day), featuring the Malian star **Vieux Farka Touré** and the Senegalese sensation **Cheikh Lô,** along with the vocalists **Fred Ross** and **Martha High** (Brown's longtime backing singer and sometime hairdresser). Aug. 23-24: The twenty-fifth annual Roots of American Music Festival brings the sounds of New Orleans to town. The festival opens with a battle between the **Pinettes Brass Band** (an all-female ensemble that's making its New York City début) and the **Hot 8 Brass Band.** Later that night, the Hot 8 and other funky acts get the crowd ready for the R. & B. goddess **Irma Thomas.** The following morning, **Pete Seeger** performs a family concert. The festival closes that evening with a broadly eclectic bill, featuring everything from old-fashioned blues (**Alabama Slim** and **Adolphus Bell,** among many others) and the jazz bassist **Charlie Haden,** accompanied by his daughter **Petra** and other family members, to the country punks the **Knitters** and the punk poetess **Patti Smith.**

MCCARREN PARK POOL
Lorimer St. between Bayard St. and Driggs Ave., Brooklyn—Aug. 24: **Yo La Tengo** and **Titus Andronicus,** from the Garden State, entertain the

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TABLES FOR TWO
SCARPETTA

HONORE BROWN

355 W. 14th St., at Ninth Ave. (212-691-0555)—In a town full of whiz-kid chefs, Scott Conant is an anomaly; at thirty-seven, he cooks like an older man—wisely, taking his time, knowing exactly what he's doing. Having established his mastery of Italian cuisine at L'Impero (where he pulled off the oxymoron of refined rustic) and Alto (where he veered into esoterica), Conant has now relocated, jettisoning the stuffy drapes-and-sconces trappings of his previous restaurants for Scarpetta, a streamlined space on the border of the meatpacking district. Think billionaire's farmhouse: high rafters; a peaked, retractable roof; mirrors tilting from the walls, strapped in place with giant leather belts.

The most telling design feature, however, is the rows of Edison bulbs, filaments exposed, suspended in glass-and-steel boxes. As a waiter will explain, Conant has decided to strip things down; the philosophy is "Nothing flashy." It takes *cojones* (or, given Conant's field of cuisine, *coglioni*) to serve as your signature dish something as banal as spaghetti with tomato sauce (and to charge twenty-four dollars for it), but Conant's version of the Italian warhorse—perfected at L'Impero and reincarnated here—is a small marvel: earthy and sweet, a chiaroscuro of bright and dark notes, the tomatoes and basil achieving a kind of velvety symbiosis with the just-shy-of-tender pasta. The main courses are perhaps too straightforward, albeit cooked with thoughtfulness and nuance. By contrast, the pastas are nearly all wows: octopus is the unexpected star of a vigorous ragù; chickpeas, pancetta, and bitter greens vie for supremacy in a silky, buttery meld with cavatelli. (The lone misstep in this category is the ponderous duck-and-foie-gras ravioli, striped with a sticky-sweet Marsala reduction.)

The crowd reflects the restaurant's address: weeknights belong to tyro bankers in French-blue button-downs (male) and sweaters knotted around the shoulders (female), weekends to girls in tiny dresses with strategic cutouts and their jock-ish dates. But Scarpetta has little in common with the oversexed lounges and high-end culinary theme parks (Del Posto, Craftsteak, Morimoto) that dominate the neighborhood. If anything, the most theatrical aspect of the place—the stadium-like retractable ceiling—seems to provoke more anxiety than pride: one waiter confided that he'd had nightmares about sudden rainstorms. There's something charmingly old-fashioned about the attitude here; the staff even volunteer that Conant is "a really nice guy." (Open daily for dinner. Entrées $22-$38.)

—*Ligaya Mishan*

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SIGNS OF LIFE

If hip-hop's declining popularity bothers Nas, he will need to have a stern talk with himself. His 2006 album, "Hip Hop Is Dead," was one of the loudest complaints to date about the genre's lack of direction (and a pulse). But maybe Nas needed to renounce hip-hop so he could return on his own terms. His new album, "Untitled," has revitalized this sombre, prolix rapper who has, at times, had more admirers than listeners. The unofficial, widely known title of "Untitled" is "Nigger," and it's a clue: Nas found inspiration in his anger. He has new put-downs for old enemies (bigots, sadistic cops, Fox News), and at a recent festival in the New York area, Nas pointed the cannon closer to home, dismissing Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. Find the mix tape that Nas released with DJ Green Lantern before the official album's release and you'll also discover that Nas is, among other things, "the fifth nigga in the Beatles." I'm not mad at that. Nas performs on Aug. 27 at Webster Hall as part of the Samsung AT&T Summer Krush.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

hipsters. With the English dance-music singer **Ebony Bones.** (For more information, visit www.jellynyc.com.)

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—Aug. 24: The throbbing sounds of disco and electro-punk get a fresh coat of glitter in the music of **Heloise & the Savoir Faire.** Aug. 26: The lovably shaggy band **Dr. Dog** trots onstage for a night of skewed, organ-driven retro rock.

NOKIA THEATRE TIMES SQUARE
Broadway at 44th St. (212-307-7171)—Aug. 20: **Chris Isaak** may be most beloved for "Wicked Game," his haunting addition to David Lynch's 1990 film, "Wild at Heart," but the stylish roots-rocker has remained tirelessly prolific in the years since that atmospheric song was released. Still sporting his signature quiff and continuing to croon with a smooth sound reminiscent of Roy Orbison, Isaak makes stirring, melancholy music. With the blue-eyed soul man **James Hunter.**

SOUTHPAW
125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—Aug. 22: The **Hot 8 Brass Band,** from New Orleans (see also Lincoln Center Out of Doors). Aug. 23: The **Wood Brothers** are Chris, the bass player from Medeski Martin & Wood, and Oliver, a guitar-toting Southern rocker. Together they strum, pick, and sing their way through the backcountry.

WEBSTER HALL
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—Aug. 20: The triumvirate of **Everclear, Soul Asylum,** and **Cracker** have multiple radio hits between them, and these bands were once the sound of the American underground gone mainstream. They may not have reached the commercial heights of some of their grunge-rock contemporaries, but their music endures.

THE ZIPPER FACTORY THEATRE
336 W. 37th St. (212-352-3101)—Aug. 21: **Dean & Britta.** Dean Wareham led the whisper-quiet trio Galaxie 500 before starting the popular lo-fi alternative-rock band Luna. Britta Phillips joined him in that group a few years before its demise, in 2004. The two stayed together to make more moody music—hushed pop that's augmented with a lush sensuality.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Aug. 20-23: The pianist **Richie Beirach** leads a trio featuring the bassist **George Mraz** and the drummer **Billy Hart.** A few years ago, Beirach and Mraz teamed up with the violinist **Gregor Huebner** (who joins them here) to record the album "Round About Monteverdi," a 2003 sleeper of considerable beauty. The trumpeter **Randy Brecker** adds another dimension to the band for this run.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Aug. 19-24: To judge by his last few albums, *the smooth-jazz guitar giant* **Larry Carlton** *has* toughened up his act, letting loose with the bluesy edge that Steely Dan fans so fondly remember from his bruising solo on "Kid Charlemagne."

THE CHARLIE PARKER JAZZ FESTIVAL
The spirit rather than the letter of bebop is honored in this two-day, dual-locale gathering. In Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park on Aug. 23, the program features performances by the singer **Vanessa Rubin,** the drummer **Rashied Ali** and his quintet, the pianist **Robert Glasper,** and the only dyed-in-the-wool bebop ensemble of the bill: the pianist **Barry Harris's** trio with the saxophonist **Charles McPherson.** The following day, the patriarchal pianist **Randy Weston,** the Latin-jazz rumble of **Jerry Gonzalez** and the **Fort Apache** band, and two promising talents, the pianist **Eric Lewis** and the singer **Gretchen Parlato,** enliven Tompkins Square Park. (For more information, visit www.cityparksfoundation.org.)

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Aug. 19-24: **Trio da Paz,** with the guests **Harry Allen** on saxophone, **Joe Locke** on vibraphone, and **Maucha Adnet** on vocals, salutes the Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim and the saxophone titan Stan Getz, whose collaboration in the sixties brought bossa nova international recognition.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Aug. 21-24: The **Steve Kuhn** trio, with its special guest **Eddie Gomez.** On last year's album "Pastorale," the pianist Kuhn and the bassist Gomez displayed empathic communication skills. Expect the same here. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Aug. 22-24: **Kate McGarry's** new album, "If Less Is More, Nothing Is Everything," finds the singer taking on established standards ("You're My Thrill") and more recently minted material (The Cars' "Just What I Needed").

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000, ext. 344)—Too often overlooked, **Charli Persip** is one of the last great drummers of the hard-bop era still around. He's here with a trio on Aug. 22.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Aug. 19-24: The high-velocity excitement that the trumpeter **Terell Stafford** used to stir up Bobby Watson's Horizon band remains on the surface of his playing, but he has matured into a deep player. Among the gifted peers who stock his quintet are the saxophonist **Tim Warfield** and the pianist **Bruce Barth.** The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

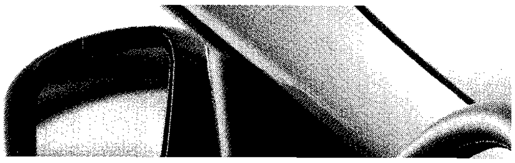
ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"J.M.W. Turner."** Through Sept. 21. ♦ **"Art of the Royal Court: Treasures in Pietre Dure from the Palaces of Europe."** Through Sept. 21. ♦ **"Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy."** Through Sept. 1. ♦ **"Framing a Century: Master Photographs, 1840-1940."** Through Sept. 1. ♦ **"Jeff Koons on the Roof."** Through Oct. 26. ♦ **"Early Buddhist Manuscript Painting: The Palm-Leaf Tradition."** Through March 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Dalí: Painting and Film."** Through Sept. 15. ♦ From a house in a box, sent to Australia with British émigrés in the eighteen-thirties, to a digitally fabricated cottage, engineered at M.I.T. for New Orleans, many of the projects in **"Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling"** were designed with function in mind. But there are unrealized fantasias, too—take Archigram's hive-like "Plug-In City (1962-64)." Five full-size units by contemporary architects are installed in an outdoor lot adjacent to the museum, while indoors—in addition to plans, drawings, photographs, and models by the likes of Breuer, Fuller, and Wright—there is a film short by Buster Keaton, in which the Great Stone Face does his best to assemble a portable love nest for his bride. Through Oct. 20. ♦ **"Pipe, Glass, Bottle of Rum: The Art of Appropriation."** Through Nov. 10. ♦ **"Kirchner and the Berlin Street."** Through Nov. 10. ♦ **"Looking at Music."** Through Dec. 31. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Louise Bourgeois."** Through Sept. 28. ♦ **"Imageless: The Scientific Study and Experimental Treatment of an Ad Reinhardt Black Painting."** For the last ten years of his career, Reinhardt (1913-1967), the reluctant father of minimalism, devoted himself to canvases

RUTH GWILY



painted in barely discernible shades of black. Along with this stark reduction came an obsession with technique. Reinhardt's matte, powderlike surface was designed to achieve an effect he described as "formless, directionless, pure, transcendental, timeless." So what happens when that surface is marred and then over-painted in an attempt at restoration? One such result is displayed here as a "study painting." A behind-the-scenes video shows conservators, scientists, curators, and artists (including Robert Ryman) puzzling over the specimen. For Reinhardt purists, the four pristine black paintings displayed in an adjoining room are the show's greatest reward. Through Sept. 14. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Buckminster Fuller: Starting with the Universe."** Through Sept. 21. ♦ **"Paul McCarthy: Central Symmetrical Rotation Movement—Three Installations, Two Films."** Through Oct. 12. ♦ **"Polaroids: Mapplethorpe."** Through Sept. 7. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Ghada Amer: Love Has No End."** Through Oct. 19. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"The Horse."** Through Jan. 4. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"House Proud: Nineteenth Century Watercolor Interiors from the Thaw Collection."** Through Jan. 25. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—Between 1901 and 1919, Henry Clay Frick spent more than half a million dollars on three paintings by Vermeer. It was a fortune, of course, but it seems like a song when the panels are seen side by side—as they have not been in nearly a decade. **"Frick's Vermeers Reunited"** displays the intimate masterworks without fanfare, letting "Girl Interrupted at Her Music," "Officer and Laughing Girl," and "Mistress and Maid" speak for themselves. Brilliant sun catches the window mullions, the feather on the officer's debonair hat, and the edge of the laughing girl's kerchief. The mistress's pearls glint, but as a texture distinct from the white fur trimming her jacket. The young musician looks demure, but her garment glows red—and the interrupter leans close. Through Nov. 2. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

A photograph by Ellen Auerbach in "Of the Refrain," at Mann.

MUSEUM OF BIBLICAL ART
Broadway at 61st St. (212-408-1500)—The great German artist Albrecht Dürer travelled to Italy in 1494 and returned a year later to Nürnberg inspired by the works of his southern contemporaries and the ancient sculptures he saw there. (A second yearlong visit, in 1505, was just as fruitful.) **"Art in Transition"** tracks Dürer's post-Italy development in prints, his strongest medium. Along with the predictable greatest hits—the engravings "Adam and Eve," "Melancholia," and "The Knight, Death, and the Devil," as well as the woodcuts "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and "The Rhinoceros"—are oddball devotional works and an extraordinary, multi-panel woodcut portraying Emperor Maximilian I riding in a triumphal chariot. Like the Met's 2003 show of Leonardo da Vinci drawings (but distinctly off the tourist route), this is mandatory viewing for lovers of master printing and draftsmanship. Through Sept. 21. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

NEW MUSEUM
235 Bowery, at Prince St. (212-219-1222)—**"After Nature."** Through Sept. 21. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Kehinde Wiley—The World Stage: Africa, Lagos ~ Dakar."** Through Oct. 26. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

"FRIDA KAHLO AND THE MEXICAN RENAISSANCE"
This show of photographs ends its tour of European and American museums shoehorned into the gallery that organized it, but Kahlo's witchy allure is irresistible in any space. Although the exhibition's larger theme is only lightly sketched in—through portraits of and works by Diego Rivera, Manuel and Lola Álvarez Bravo, Tina Modotti, and others in Kahlo's circle—it is the artist herself who best embodies the renaissance. A marvel of near-maniacal self-invention, she was a magnet for photographers, including Carl Van Vechten, Leo Matiz, Imogen Cunningham, and Nickolas Muray. Few of them got past her folkloric façade, but they all contributed to the making of an icon. Through Sept. 14. (Throckmorton, 145 E. 57th St. 212-223-1059.)

"ORIGINAL BOOKS"
The booming market for photography books has prompted several shows of late, and this one focusses on five titles by artists who deserve to be better known. All published since 1990 and primarily black-and-white, the books put a smart conceptual twist on traditional photography. Jens Liebchen's images of Tirana, Albania, would appear to describe a war-torn city, but the conflict has long since abated. Keizo Kitajima's project "A.D. 1991" took him to a number of European cities, where he photographed the citizens and their environment; only his street portraits are here, and they're strong enough to recall both Walker Evans and Michael Schmidt. Through Sept. 6. (Cohen Amador, 41 E. 57th St. 212-759-6740.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

"THE GOOD LIFE"
The show's title implies the sort of leisure that only the wealthy enjoy, and a number of photographers here (Tina Barney, Daniela Rossell, and Martin Parr among them) make class their subject. But many more see the good life as something that everyone—from Bill Owens's sloshed suburbanites at their backyard grill to Massimo Vitali's sunbathers at the beach—can have. The revellers in Tod Papageorge's shot of Studio 54 on New Year's Eve may be having more fun than Larry Sultan's parents reading in bed, but don't bet on it. Through Aug. 22. (Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610.)

"A RICTUS GRIN"
Expressions devoid of emotional content—like the eerie fixed grin on a corpse or the insincere smile of a glib politician—inspired this intriguing sleeper of a show, curated by Christopher Eamon and Anke Kempkes. A cynical world view predominates, as seen in Öyvind Fahlström's delightfully unsettling 1966 film, in which bystanders watch fake demonstrators parading by with posters of Bob Hope and Chairman Mao. But some works break ranks. Duncan Campbell's Godardesque video portrait of the feisty, cigarette-wielding Irish activist Bernadette Devlin, who was elected to parliament in 1970, at the tender age of twenty-one, is surprisingly poignant. Through Sept. 6. (Broadway 1602 Gallery, 1182 Broadway, at 28th St. 212-481-0362.)

Short List

"I WON'T GROW UP": Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727. Through Aug. 29. **"OF THE REFRAIN":** Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 24th St. 212-989-7600. Through Aug. 22. **"TOTALLY RAD: NEW YORK IN THE '80S":** Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 27th St. 212-563-4474. Through Sept. 6. **"UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA":** Tonkonow, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-255-8450. Through Aug. 29. **"WHEN COLOR WAS NEW":** Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410. Through Sept. 6.

DANCE

DOWNTOWN DANCE FESTIVAL
All styles are welcome at this wide-ranging festival of free dance organized by Jonathan Hollander, of Battery Dance Company, from re-creations of Isadora Duncan's revolutionary works (Isadora-NOW) to *à la page* modern dance (Battleworks). Hollander is also spicing things up with two days (Aug. 18-19) of South Asian dance, featuring several companies performing traditional and updated versions of bharata natyam, kathak, and Odissi. (Chase Plaza, Nassau St. at Liberty St.: Aug. 18-22 at noon; the Lawn at Battery Park: Aug. 23-24 at 1. For a full schedule, call 212-219-3910 or visit www.batterydanceco.com.)

DOUGLAS DUNN & DANCERS
Dunn, a veteran of the New York postmodern dance movement of the seventies, is still creating refined, enigmatic works, merging elegantly simple movement with intellectual sophistication and a sense of play. This week, he and twelve other dancers will be at the Elevated Acre, performing "In Formations," a half-hour site-specific study in geometric patterns that dissolve and emerge once again. (55 Water St. 212-966-6999. Aug. 18-22 at 12:15.)

RICHARD MOVE'S MOVEOPOLIS
"Hostile Takeover," part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's "Sitelines" series, infiltrates the financial district with commando raids of fashion and femininity, staged by a connoisseur of flamboyance. The performances, with a different woman in each setting, start at the North Atrium balcony of the South Street Seaport's Pier 17 mall on Aug. 18 and continue at 77 Water St. on Aug. 19, then 7 World Trade Center on Aug. 20, the Hermès window on Broad Street on Aug. 21, and a stall in the Fulton Fish Market on Aug. 22. The culmination is a full-cast rave at the South Street Seaport on Aug. 25. (212-219-9401. Aug. 18 at 6, Aug. 19-21 at 12:30, Aug. 22 at 5:30, and Aug. 25 at 6.)

CEDAR LAKE CONTEMPORARY BALLET
The well-funded troupe periodically takes advantage of its chic home in the Chelsea gallery district by mounting dance installations. In the latest, "The Copier," the Canadian choreographer Jill Johnson, a protégé of William Forsythe, sets the repetitions and routines of the digital era against the unrepeatable nature of a live dance performance. As at a gallery, the audience is free to mingle. (547 W. 26th St. 212-868-4444. Aug. 20-22 at 7 and 8 and Aug. 23 at 2 and 3.)

LINCOLN CENTER OUT OF DOORS
The dance programming of the free concert series wraps up with David Dorfman's "Underground." In it, the fifty-something choreographer and his corps of much younger dancers grapple with the legacy of the radical Left. Though the questions come in the form of spoken and projected text, the answers are corporeal: crowds roil and splinter; dancers respond to poll inquiries physically; fists are raised and raised again. Dorfman's mockery of contemporary apathy is too easy, but the way a moment can slip from comic to poignant is impressive. Toshi Reagon, a soulful singer capable of inspiring some raised fists of her own, opens the program with a little help from her mother, Bernice Johnson Reagon, of Sweet Honey in the Rock. (Damrosch Park Band Shell. 212-875-5766. Aug. 21 at 7.)

OUT OF TOWN

JACOB'S PILLOW
Aug. 20-24: The return of the Trey McIntyre Project to Jacob's Pillow is also a new beginning, the kickoff to the group's inaugural season as a full-time ballet troupe, based in Boise, Idaho. McIntyre is a prolific choreographer with more than seventy works under his belt (he's only thirty-eight). He creates well-crafted, sunny pieces, often set to sophisticated pop music and filled with detailed, lightning-fast footwork and crisp, energetic partnering. At the Ted Shawn, his dancers perform two new works, one of which, "Leatherwing Bat," is vaguely autobiographical (and set to songs by Peter, Paul, and Mary), the other a pas de deux ("Surrender"), as well as "The Reassuring Effects (of Form and Poetry)" (2003), set to Dvořák's sweeping Serenade for Strings in E-Minor. ♦ Aug. 21-24: Keigwin + Company, the talented showman Larry Keigwin and his charismatic group, bring "Elements," a suite that has fun with the old earth-air-fire-water idea. Liz Prince's flamboyant costumes are the kind that get applause before anyone moves, and Keigwin's creations—dancers as lizards, a flight crew turning the standard safety spiel into a vogue routine—can be exhilarating and hilarious. The songs are eclectic, from Mozart to Devo, and while part of the work's joy stems from the variety of dance styles that Keigwin draws upon, the range of inspiration also varies, with gags as ancient as the piece's concept and patches that feel like padding. (Becket, Mass. 413-243-0745. For a complete schedule, visit www.jacobspillow.org.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
CONCERTS IN TOWN

MOSTLY MOZART FESTIVAL
An exceptionally diverse season at Lincoln Center comes to a close. Aug. 19-20 at 8: Osmo Vänskä, the disciplined director of the Minnesota Orchestra, leads the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra in music in the keys of three flats by Mozart (the Serenade for Winds in C Minor and the buoyant Symphony No. 39 in E-Flat Major) and Beethoven (the Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor); the Romanian pianist Mihaela Ursuleasa makes her festival début. (Avery Fisher Hall.) ♦ Aug. 20 at 10:30: Ursuleasa offers a solo recital featuring works by Chopin (Three Mazurkas, Op. 59), Beethoven (the Sonata No. 23, "Appassionata"), and Ginastera in one of the festival's "Little Night Music" concerts—intimate evenings at the Kaplan Penthouse. ♦ Aug. 21 at 8: The Emerson String Quartet, still the world's reigning classical foursome, performs an enticing program featuring Mozart's String Quartet in B-Flat Major, K. 458 (the "Hunt"), Kaija Saariaho's "Terra Memoria" (2006), and Schubert's "Trout" Quintet (with the pianist Jonathan Biss and the bassist Timothy Cobb). (Avery Fisher Hall.) ♦ Aug. 21 at 10:30: The "Little Night Music" series wraps up with a musical nightcap offered by the highly regarded young Jupiter String Quartet—Thomas Adès's disarming "Arcadiana" and (with the violist Teng Li and the cellist Priscilla Lee) Schoenberg's richly late-Romantic "Verklärte Nacht." (Kaplan Penthouse.) ♦ Aug. 22-23 at 8: Louis Langrée, Mostly Mozart's music director, closes the festival the way he began it, conducting the festival orchestra in a program offering a Mozart masterpiece (the Mass in C Minor) along with an iconic twentieth-century German work (Strauss's "Metamorphosen," scored for twenty-three solo strings). The vocal soloists are Sally Matthews, Kate Lindsey, William Ferguson, and Jason Grant; the Concert Chorale of New York assists. (Avery Fisher Hall.) (212-721-6500. For full schedule of concerts, pre-concert recitals, and talks, see www.lincolncenter.org.)

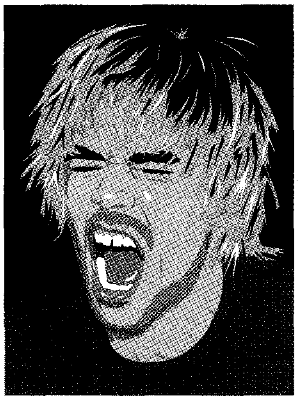
BARGEMUSIC
Aug. 20 and Aug. 22 at 8: Olga Vinokur, one of the barge's fine house pianists, offers an ambitiously Horowitzian program of works by Scarlatti, Schumann (the Sonata No. 2 in G Minor), Scriabin (four Études and the Sonata No. 5), Chopin, and Liszt (including the "Rigoletto" paraphrase). ♦ Aug. 23 at 8 and Aug. 24 at 4: The young and adventurous Zukofsky Quartet pulls back a bit from its modernist mandate to perform string quartets by Schubert (the charming Quartet in E-Flat Major, D. 87) and Szymanowski, as well as Boccherini's String Quintet No. 24 in E Major (with the cellist Katherine Cherbas). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

OPERA OMNIA: "THE CORONATION OF POPPEA"
A new Baroque-opera company takes the genre back to its intimate, Florentine beginnings by stag-

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SUMMERTIME BLUES

Ever since Eugene O'Neill and his cohorts first rehearsed the burgeoning master's lines in the dunes of Provincetown in the nineteen-twenties, and Tennessee Williams fell in love with the place in the late nineteen-thirties, the tip of the Cape has been home to a number of writers and artists who have enriched the American stage. Nowadays, on Commercial Street, you can catch the seasoned New Yorkers Nora Burns and Mike Albo working out new routines, or you can applaud up-and-coming stars, such as Billy Hough. Hough's rough, melancholy voice is a big instrument that belies his diminutive size. Just recently, sitting behind the piano at Enzo's and sporting an Andy Warhol wig, the openly gay Hough kept the audience mesmerized with his tale of having fallen in love with a woman. Then he smashed his face in someone's birthday cake. Absurdist theatre can happen anywhere, especially if it's kept alive by artists like Hough, whose implicitly political talk grows more poignant and more beautiful in summer's closing days.

—*Hilton Als*



QUICKHONEY

ing Monteverdi's immortal (and amoral) masterwork at the new concert and club space (Le) Poisson Rouge (where a cash bar awaits your patronage). Evi Stein conducts an ensemble using period instruments; Hai-Ting Chinn, Cherry Duke, and the captivating Melissa Fogarty head the cast. (158 Bleecker St. 800-838-3006. Aug. 21-22 and Aug. 25-27 at 7:30; doors open one hour before the performance.)

BOSTON POPS ESPLANADE ORCHESTRA

The ever-popular Beantown band (with its conductor, Keith Lockhart) comes to Radio City Music Hall with the Broadway star Brian Stokes Mitchell as its guest; songs by Leonard Bernstein are on the program. (Sixth Ave. at 50th St. 212-307-1000. Aug. 21 at 8.)

(LE) POISSON ROUGE: NICO MUHLY

The young composer and downtown scenester teams up with Thomas Bartlett (a.k.a. Doveman) and Sam Amidon, two fellow transplants from Vermont, to perform a very informal concert that will feature folk ballads, liturgical dance, readings from Melville, and some genre-defying new music. (158 Bleecker St. Aug. 23 at 8. Tickets are first come, first served; doors open one hour before the performance.)

LOCRIAN CHAMBER PLAYERS

The intrepid group, whose musicians only perform works less than ten years old, offers a slate of pieces by Charles Wuorinen (including the New York première of the "Duo Sonata," for flute and piano), Sebastian Currier, Hayes Biggs (a world première), and the Dutch master Louis Andriessen (the "Miserere," for string quartet). (10th Floor Performance Space, Riverside Church, 91 Claremont Ave. Aug. 23 at 8. No tickets required.)

OUT OF TOWN

TANGLEWOOD FESTIVAL

Even at Tanglewood, the summer must come to an end. Aug. 20 at 8: The Beaux Arts Trio, founded more than a half century ago, was the first piano trio to concertize as a permanent ensemble, and, with the commanding Menahem Pressler at the keyboard, it has remained unsurpassed. The group retires in September; in the first of two final American programs, it offers canonical trios by Dvořák (the "Dumky") and Ravel, with a new work by György Kurtág in between. ♦ Aug. 21 at 8: The second concert features the two piano trios of Franz Schubert. ♦ Aug. 22 at 8:30: The Boston Symphony Orchestra, naturally, dominates the final weekend, with three all-Beethoven concerts. The first is led by Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos: the Mass in C Major (featuring such singers as the soprano Hei-Kyung Hong and the tenor Richard Croft, both Met favorites) and the Fifth Symphony. ♦ Aug. 23 at 8:30: Christoph von Dohnányi, the exacting former chief of the Cleveland Orchestra, conducts the Symphony No. 2 in D Major and the Symphony No. 3 in E-Flat Major ("Eroica"). ♦ Aug. 24 at 2:30: The season ends in the traditional way, with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and nothing else. The vocal soloists are Christiane Oelze, Lilli Paasikivi, Jorma Silvasti, and Hanno Müller-Brachman, with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus assisting; Dohnányi conducts. (Lenox, Mass. 888-266-1200.)

GLIMMERGLASS OPERA

Shakespeare is all the rage at Glimmerglass this summer. Aug. 21 at 8 and Aug. 23 at 1:30: Handel's **"Giulio Cesare,"** with Laura Vlasak Nolen singing the "pants role" of the title and with Lyubov Petrova, another singer from the roster of the Metropolitan Opera, as Cleopatra; David Stern conducts. ♦ Aug. 22 at 8: Richard Wagner's **"Das Liebesverbot"** ("The Ban on Love"), an early, bel-canto-style comic work inspired by "Measure for Measure." Corrado Rovaris conducts a cast that features Mark Schnaible, Claudia Waite, Richard Cox, and Holli Harrison. ♦ Aug. 23 at 8: **"Kiss Me, Kate,"** Cole Porter's Runyonesque treatment of "The Taming of the Shrew." Lisa Vroman and Brad Little and Courtney Romano and David Larsen are the musical's two contentious couples; David Charles Abell. ♦ Aug. 24 at 2: Anne Bogart's production of Bellini's **"I Capuleti e i Montecchi,"** a melodious adaptation of the story that inspired Shakespeare to write "Romeo and Juliet." Sarah Coburn and Sandra Piques Eddy (*en travesti*) take the leading roles; David Angus. (Cooperstown, N.Y. 607-547-2255. These are the final performances.)

MAVERICK CONCERTS

Aug. 23 at 6: Chamber music's most magnetic duo—the cellist Zuill Bailey and the pianist Simone Dinnerstein—offers a Hudson Valley Schubertiade, with major works by the Viennese master (the Impromptus for Piano, Op. 90, and the "Arpeggione" Sonata) bookending a program that also includes music by Bach (the Third Cello Suite) and Joan Tower ("Très Lent," in honor of her seventieth birthday). ♦ Aug. 24 at 4: The dazzling Miró Quartet performs string quartets by Debussy, Ives (No. 1), and Brahms (in A Minor, Op. 51, No. 2). (Woodstock, N.Y. For information about tickets, call 845-679-8217.)

MUSIC MOUNTAIN

Vanderbilt University's Blair String Quartet (whose violist, John Kochanowski, was a member of the legendary Concord Quartet) comes to northern Connecticut's chamber-music shrine to perform the First Quartets of Beethoven (in F Major) and Ives ("A Revival Service") along with Dohnányi's very Brahmsian Piano Quintet in C Minor (with Sally Pinkas). (Falls Village, Conn. 860-824-7126. Aug. 24 at 3.)

MOVIES OPENING

DEATH RACE

A science-fiction thriller in which an ex-con (Jason Statham) must take part in a deadly car race. Directed by Paul W. S. Anderson. Opening Aug. 22. (In wide release.)

HAMLET 2

A comedy, directed by Andy Fleming, starring Steve Coogan as a high-school teacher who gets his students to stage a sequel to "Hamlet." Co-starring Catherine Keener and Amy Poehler. Opening Aug. 22. (In wide release.)

THE HOUSE BUNNY

Anna Faris stars in this comedy as a Playboy Bunny who teaches sorority girls the ropes. Directed by Fred Wolf and co-starring Colin Hanks and Kat Dennings. Opening Aug. 22. (In wide release.)

THE LONGSHOTS

A sports drama, directed by Fred Durst (of Limp Bizkit), about a girl who wants to play on a Pop Warner football team. Starring Keke Palmer and Ice Cube. Opening Aug. 22. (In wide release.)

MOMMA'S MAN

Azazel Jacobs directed this drama, about a thirtyish man who moves back to his parents' Tribeca loft. Opening Aug. 22. (Angelika Film Center.)

RICHARD SERRA: THINKING ON YOUR FEET

A documentary about the artist, directed by Maria Anna Tappeiner. Opening Aug. 20. (Film Forum.)

THE ROCKER

Peter Cattaneo directed this romantic comedy, about an aging failed rock drummer (Rainn Wilson) who tries for the big time again. Opening Aug. 22. (In wide release.)

TROUBLE THE WATER

A documentary, directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, about a New Orleans couple attempting to cope with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Opening Aug. 22. (IFC Center and ImageNation at the Faison Firehouse Theatre.)

NOW PLAYING

A CORNER IN WHEAT

In its fourteen minutes, D. W. Griffith's stark and subtle adaptation, from 1909, of a novel by the muckraking realist Frank Norris offers a surprisingly novelistic scope and grandeur. The story concerns a commodities trader whose successful speculations win him a monopoly on the world's wheat, doubling the cost of bread and wreaking havoc among the poor. Eschewing his famously probing psychological close-ups, Griffith hews his tale out of vast, weighty blocks of action (the first five minutes contain just five shots). Intertwining the fate of three characters—the farmer, the baker, and the speculator—he invokes a mood of impending cataclysm and infuses it with a moral gravity of Biblical proportions. The willfully unadorned visual rhetoric, which Griffith ingeniously heightens through an increasingly contrapuntal editing scheme, conjures an air of Old Testament vengeance and righteous awe.—*Richard Brody* (Anthology Film Archives; Aug. 23.)

THE DARK KNIGHT

The last Batman movie was grim and methodical; this one, also directed by Christopher Nolan, is grim and incoherent, with a thudding soundtrack, fights shot from too close a distance to see anything, multiple events clanging together like discordant bells, and freaky sadism and menace. Christian Bale is the placid Bruce Wayne, a swank gent in Armani suits. As Batman, he has greater urgency, but he delivers his lines in a hoarse voice with an unvarying inflection. He's no match for the great Heath Ledger as his nemesis, the Joker. Ledger, in a fright wig and gobs of white make-up, shambles and slides into a room, bending his knees and twisting his neck and suddenly surging right into someone's face like a deep-sea creature coming up for air. He's thoroughly terrifying (do not, despite the PG-13 rating, bring little children), and, as you're watching him, you can't help wondering how badly he messed himself up in order to play the role this way. "The Dark Knight" has been made in a time of terror, but it's not fighting terror; it's embracing and unleashing it—while making sure, with proper calculation, to set up the next installment of the corporate franchise. With Gary Oldman, Aaron Eckhart, and Maggie Gyllenhaal.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 7/21/08.) (In wide release.)

ELEGY

Of all the good actors who have adorned the cycle of middle-aged-professor films in the last decade, Ben Kingsley, in this adaptation of Philip Roth's 2001 novel, "The Dying Animal," is the most formidable and convincing. Kingsley's David Kepesh is a literature teacher at Columbia and a regular virtuoso performer on television and NPR. At sixty-four, Kingsley has the grizzled barrel chest of an aging sexual warrior, a strong nose, and a shaved head. He's shrewd enough to make David not a monster but a plausibly selfish man. Nicholas Meyer's script captures some of the Rothian tone—the impatience, the sharpness, the full-bore egotism that modulates into rueful self-recognition. At the end of the semester, the professor seduces a graduate student, Consuelo (Penélope Cruz), a woman of Cuban descent, slightly formal in her manner. She wants a connection to culture; David wants a final mad immersion in lust, which arrives, not to his surprise, with its attendant idiocies of jealousy and possessiveness. Mortality and misfortune abruptly enter his life as well. With Patricia Clarkson, Dennis Hopper, and Peter Sarsgaard. Directed by Isabel Coixet.—*D.D.* (8/11 & 18/08) (In wide release.)

FROZEN RIVER

The chill air of December in northern New York State, at the Canadian border, blows through the hardscrabble lives on view in Courtney Hunt's first feature film, a prize-winner at the Sundance festival. Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo), a mother of two boys, has just been abandoned by her husband, a recovering drug addict and a compulsive gambler, who's run off with the bankroll that was earmarked for a new, warm double-wide trailer. Searching for him at the nearby Mohawk reservation, she meets Lila Littlewolf (Misty Upham), who lures her into smuggling a pair of Chinese immigrants into the United States. The cash that goes with it suggests to Ray a way out of her plight. Hunt's film, made quickly and on a low budget, is full of traditional virtues: sympathetic and complex characters, plausible situations, evocative locations, committed acting, painful moral dilemmas—everything but a touch of mad beauty and a raison d'être. Hunt, who also wrote the script, directs a story of misery and transcendence with the kind of diligent efficiency you'd expect from an experienced studio toiler. What hath Sundance wrought?—*R.B.* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
ART-HOUSE DODGER

The basic plot of Robert Bresson's "Pickpocket," from 1959 (playing at Film Forum on Aug. 20), is derived from that of "Crime and Punishment": an isolated and severe young man (Martin LaSalle) becomes a philosophical criminal who asserts his sense of superiority in larcenous acts while also longing to be caught. The difference is that Dostoyevsky is emotionally overwrought, voluble, and psychological, whereas Bresson is cool, distant, and anti-psychological—he reports on actions rather than revealing their motivation. "Pickpocket" is stripped bare, offering much movement but little acting in the normal sense. Bresson required his performers (who were nonprofessionals) to speak their lines blankly, without inflection. The result, for the audience, is that our responses bypass the usual affective mechanics of identification and empathy, settling instead on the contemplation of a soul in isolation. Bresson choreographs the complex techniques of lifting wallets and watches with such precision that one seems to be watching a kind of surreptitious ballet.

—David Denby

A GIRL CUT IN TWO
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

HELL AND HIGH WATER
The apocalyptic passions of the Cold War are pressed into tight dramatic confines in Samuel Fuller's taut, frenetic 1954 spy-and-submarine classic. Richard Widmark stars as a mercenary captain who is hired to help scientists find a suspected secret nuclear test site in the North Pacific. His vehicle, a rickety decommissioned sub, carries a rugged crew of his choice along with a pair of European physicists—an elderly professor (Victor Francen) and his assistant, a nubile young researcher (Bella Darvi), who quickly falls for the captain. Trouble comes in the form of attacks from a Chinese submarine, which quickly make clear the high stakes involved. Fuller, a combat veteran, adorns the script with plenty of military intrigue and shapes battle scenes with an expert sense of tension and menace. His visual extravagance is somewhat constrained by the new wide-screen Cinemascope process but not his emotional hysteria, which reaches fever pitch in a *Liebestod* under the blood-red emergency lights.—*R.B.* (BAM; Aug. 25.)

HELLBOY II: THE GOLDEN ARMY
The fabulist director Guillermo del Toro gets a hefty budget to continue his comic-book franchise with this action-packed fantasy about a heroic demon (Ron Perlman) and his fellow-beasties (Selma Blair and Doug Jones). This time, his team is joined by an ectoplasmic force (voiced by Seth MacFarlane, with a Colonel Klink-like accent) that can animate inanimate objects. It's that kind of movie. The plot is thin, involving some hooey about the denizens of a hidden underground world who are out to destroy humanity. And, while Hellboy and his friends set out to save the day, intriguing story lines are brought up and then dropped. (In all likelihood they will be picked up in a third installment.) This film is happy to coast on its good humor and brilliant action pieces. Fair enough, since del Toro has taken the poetry of some of his best work and butched it up, creating some of the most amazing-looking creatures and battles of his career. It's eye candy for the "Creature Features" set.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

IN SEARCH OF A MIDNIGHT KISS
A romantic comedy, of sorts, although most of the comedy winds up eating away at the romance. Written and directed by Alex Holdridge, it introduces us to a bored and bloodless slacker named Wilson (Scoot McNairy), who is adrift in Los Angeles. Most of the story takes place on New Year's Eve, which he spends first in the company of his housemates (Brian McGuire and Katie Luong) and then, more haltingly, with Vivian (Sara Simmonds), who lies somewhere between a blind date and a booby trap. The two of them traipse around the city, which is rendered in lustrous monochrome; its beauty, however, seems to pass them by, just as anything more than a hint of emotional connection tends to unnerve them. You wonder why either of them would want to spend time (especially a festive occasion) with the other, and much of their fierce dismay at the world comes across as whining, backed by a plaintive soundtrack; yet there is something oddly touching, in the end, about these lost kids who play at grownup life.—*Anthony Lane* (8/4/08) (In limited release.)

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH
The work of Jules Verne continues to offer fertile ground for filmmakers. This latest adaptation of the 1864 novel is less fruitful than the 1959 attempt, in which the softly decisive voice of James Mason acted as a special effect in itself. Still, the new film, directed by Eric Brevig, at least has the courage of its own silliness; dispensing almost instantly with logic, it plunges its professor hero (Brendan Fraser) and his reluctant nephew (Josh Hutcherson) with Vernian briskness into their subterranean exploits, during which they encounter a lonely Icelandic maiden, a thundering dinosaur, and other fantastical creatures. Some theatres will be screening the movie in 3-D: worth catching, if you want the full headlong nonsense to loom out and smack you in the face.—*A.L.* (7/28/08) (In wide release.)

MAMMA MIA!
If viewed on a Saturday night with seven or eight friends, all drunk, this might seem a compelling dose of musical entertainment. Under any other conditions, it barely approaches the tolerable. Meryl Streep, having clearly given much thought to the art of letting one's hair down, plays Donna, who runs a hotel on a Greek island and pretends to forget her heady, promiscuous past; needless to say, it surfaces again when her daughter, Sophie (Amanda Seyfried), a bride-to-be, invites the three men who could conceivably be her father (Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth, and Stellan Skarsgård) to attend the festivities. All of this is an excuse for the stars to perform, with varying degrees of skill, the greatest hits of Abba, some of which, regrettably, do not survive the disfigurement. Brosnan appears to be laboring under particular distress, and his expression, as he listens to Streep chanting her woes, is indistinguishable from that of James Bond being ranted at by a deluded villain. The script is by Catherine Johnson, who wrote the original stage play; the play's director, Phyllida Lloyd, is also along for the ride, and she seems so thrilled to have a camera at her command that she forces many of her actors to yelp and croon in closeup—never a good idea. The lighting would disgrace the interior of a bathroom. With Christine Baranski, who really can sing and dance, and Julie Walters, who can't.—*A.L.* (7/28/08) (In wide release.)

PINEAPPLE EXPRESS
It's a two-guys-on-the-run action comedy, based on an old idea by Judd Apatow, who also co-produced. Seth Rogen, a process server in a suit, witnesses a drug rubout; James Franco, Seth's pot dealer, knows the murderer, who goes in pursuit of the two of them with his pals. Both men are stoned all the time, and have to keep reminding themselves, in long, muzzy conversations that are an important part of the picture, that they are actually in serious trouble. The movie, directed by David Gordon Green, has an odd, interesting stop-and-go rhythm. The violence is perpetrated with the means at hand—bongs, lamps, coffeepots—and people often apologize for the damage they are doing. The big shoot-out and explosion at the end, however, are depressingly conventional. With Danny R. McBride as an exceptionally slippery drug distributor who takes a lot of punishment. Written by Rogen and Evan Goldberg.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

SWING VOTE
This Capra-esque satire of electoral politics shamelessly milks a host of clichés, from the common man's innate moral compass to the wisdom of children, but it's redeemed by perfect comic pitch, able pacing, and sincere democratic warmth. Much of the credit goes to Kevin Costner for his hearty vigor as Bud Johnson, a ne'er-do-well blowhard living in a trailer in Texico, New Mexico, whose vote—through a series of surprisingly plausible coincidences—turns out to decide the state, which, in turn, will decide the Presidential election. Bud, a poor single father whose sole claim on respectability is his daughter, Molly (the smart, relaxed Madeline Carroll), an ambitious and studious fifth grader, will cast that vote ten days after Election Day. When his identity is divulged, his life becomes a media circus, and, to his surprise and glee, he is assiduously courted by the superficial, slick, yet folksy Republican incumbent (Kelsey Grammer) and the tightly wound, wonky, and somewhat effete Democratic challenger (Dennis Hopper). The tone is apt, akin to that of a tall tale; the theme, dear to John Ford, of eliding fact into legend is given a striking new life; and a single brief scene of despair and degradation is more harrowing than most hard-edged dramas. Yet, though the director, Joshua Michael Stern, who co-wrote the script with Jason Richman, trades on American mythology, he has no aptitude for iconic images.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

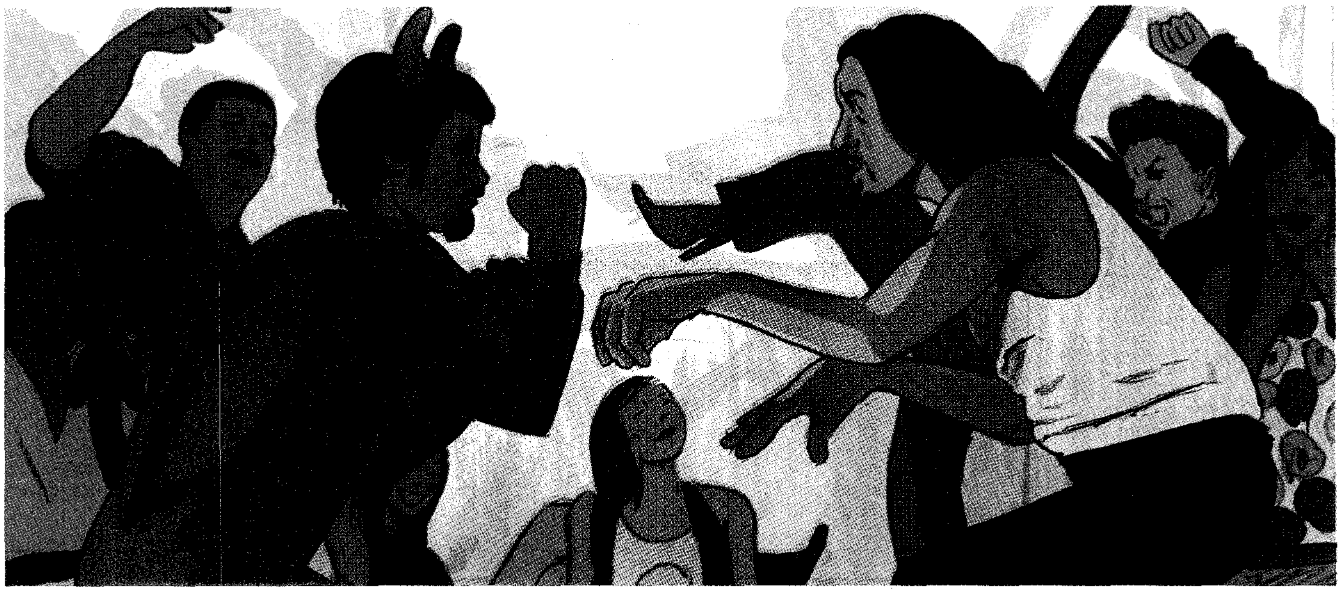
THEY WERE EXPENDABLE
Started soon after D Day and released in 1945, John Ford's tale of American defeat during the early months of the war in the Pacific centers on a dedicated, imaginative Navy lieutenant (Robert Montgomery) and his attempts to persuade superiors that his P.T. boats can fill the gap left by the destruction of the fleet. It is overlong and oddly shaped, and at times the writing isn't up to the feeling that Ford puts into it, but the picture is also magnificent. Few films have been so persuasive about the bonds that unify a squadron, or so piercing about the traumas

NEW YORKER FILMS/PHOTOFEST

that test them. The intense, understated Montgomery delivers a full and subtle portrait of leadership, and John Wayne, as Montgomery's more emotional second-in-command, demonstrates just how sincere and effective an actor he could be.—*Michael Sragow* (Walter Reade; Aug. 21.)

THE TOUCH

The eternal triangle, 1971-style, done to a turn by Ingmar Bergman, is both an emotional experience of an exalted order and an exemplary distillation of his artistry. Elliott Gould stars as David, a Jewish bull in a Swedish china shop. A German refugee, raised in New York and educated in Israel, he arrives in a rustic village to work on an archeological dig and meets Karin (Bibi Andersson), a starchy doctor's frustrated wife. The two begin a fierce, desperate affair. All smoldering Levantine flame and abrupt, self-absorbed American will, David enlivens—even in his bursts of violence—the orderly chill of Karin's domestic rounds, yet when her deliberate, staid husband (Max von Sydow) compels her to make a choice, she is paralyzed between duty and the abyss. Bergman's prowling camera, which pursues the characters in their most vulnerable moments and captures them in highly inflected, painfully intimate closeups, offers little explanation of outer circumstances but quickly plumbs the soul's core. Even the movie's rich, painterly color scheme, contrasting the crisp, clean whiteness of home with the musky green walls of the love nest, and the swarthiness of Gould's dark-bearded behemoth with the Swedish couple's papery pallor, plays not like a theatrical mannerism but like an imprint of the inner life.—*R.B.* (BAM; Aug. 21.)



Steve Coogan stars in "Hamlet 2," opening Aug. 22, as a high-school teacher who casts his students in an antic Shakespearean sequel.

RACHEL DOMM

TRANSSIBERIAN

Filmed in sickly greens and browns against a snowy white backdrop, this thriller starts promisingly, building up a good head of steam. The story concerns an American couple (Woody Harrelson and Emily Mortimer) who, while travelling the Trans-Siberian Express, are targeted by drug runners and an insistent narcotics detective (Ben Kingsley). At first, the script, by Brad Anderson and Will Conroy, tightly weaves characterization with dread in a nuanced, anxiety-producing way. But after a while the director, Anderson, dispenses with all the finesse and turns the film into a blur of double crosses, perpetually slamming train-car doors, and scene-chewing by Kingsley. The movie vanishes.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

TROPIC THUNDER

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA

Woody Allen's new movie has an easy, flowing vitality to it, a sun-drenched splendor that never falters. Two American girls go off to Barcelona for the summer—Vicky (Rebecca Hall), who is intelligent, skeptical, cautious, and thoroughly engaged to a corporate lawyer in New York, and Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), who is more adventurous than her friend but unformed and easily dissatisfied, a seeker without a lodestar. In the magnificent city, they meet Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem), a painter who is incapable of spending a night alone. Both women get involved with him, and the movie becomes a complicated triangle that forms, breaks apart, and reforms, as well as a lengthy exploration of the eternal struggle between security and passion, dependency and anarchic freedom. Juan Antonio's former wife, Maria Elena (Penélope Cruz), who is highly intelligent and artistically talented but so tempestuous that she creates havoc wherever she goes, crashes into the movie and busts everything apart. The American girls yearn for something more than bourgeois stability, but Allen means for us to understand that a life of passion alone can lead to craziness and violence. Shot in sumptuous gold and ochre colors by Javier Aguirresarobe.—*D.D.* (8/11 & 18/08) (In wide release.)

WALL-E

It has the waggish adorableness and the tripping-and-falling roughhouse of other animated films, but it's also a work of tragic nostalgia. In the first half, WALL-E, a robotic trash collector and compactor, continues to go about his duties after the human presence has been blown away from Earth by billowing waves of noxious dust. He trolls among the detritus of the vanished culture, fetishizing such junk items as plastic forks, hubcaps, and a tape of the lumbering musical "Hello, Dolly!," which provides him with models of human connection and such oddities as singing and dancing. A robot named EVE—she looks like a hovering white plastic egg designed by Steve Jobs's gang in Cupertino—lands on Earth; he woos her, and then accompanies her to a space station called the Axiom, where, it turns out, the remaining humans have been living for seven hundred years in a totalitarian pleasure garden run by a giant big-box-store company. "WALL-E" blends two kinds of science fiction—the postapocalyptic disaster movie and the dystopian fantasy derived from Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," in which people are controlled not by coercion but by pleasure. It's also a satire on the engulfing tendencies of consumer capitalism. From the Pixar division of Disney. Directed by Andrew Stanton.—*D.D.* (7/21/08) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

AMERICAN TEEN: In limited release. **THE MUMMY: TOMB OF THE DRAGON EMPEROR:** In wide release. **THE SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS 2:** In wide release. **STEP BROTHERS:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—Special screenings. Aug. 20 at 6:45 and 9:15: "The Romance of Astrea and Celadon" (2007, Eric Rohmer; in French). ♦ "Korea on Film." Aug. 21 at 6:30: "First Love" (1993, Lee Myung-Se; in Korean). ♦ "New York City Vigilantes." Aug. 21 at 7 and Aug. 23 at 9: "Ms. 45" (1981, Abel Ferrara). ♦ Aug. 21 at 9 and Aug. 23 at 5: "Death Wish" (1974, Michael Winner). ♦ Aug. 22 at 7 and Aug. 24 at 5: "Maniac Cop" (1988, William Lustig). ♦ Aug. 22 at 9:15 and Aug. 24 at 7: "Maniac Cop 2" (1990, Lustig). ♦ Aug. 23 at 7 and Aug. 24 at 9: "Vigilante" (1983, Lustig). ♦ "Essential Cinema." Aug. 23 at 4:30: "Wavelength" (1967, Michael Snow). ♦ Aug. 24 at 4:30: "< — > (Back and Forth)" (1969, Snow). ♦ "D. W. Griffith—100 Years Later." Aug. 23 at 6:30: A program of six short silent films, including "A Corner in Wheat" (†). ♦ Aug. 24 at 6: "Intolerance" (1916; silent).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Elliott Gould: Star for an Uptight Age." Aug. 20 at 9:15: "Harry and Walter Go to New York" (1976, Mark Rydell). ♦ Aug. 21 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "The Touch" (†). ♦ "The Best of Newfest." Aug. 22 at 6:50: "U People" (2008, Hanifah Walidah and Olive Demetrius). ♦ Aug. 23 at 4:30: "Being Proud, Black, & LGBT in America" (2008, Monalisa McCombs). ♦ Aug. 24 at 6:50: "The World Unseen" (2008, Shamim Sharif). ♦ "Tribute to Richard Widmark." Aug. 25 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Hell and High Water" (†). ♦ Aug. 26 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Night and the City" (1950, Jules Dassin).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—"The French Crime Wave." All films are in French. Aug. 20 at 1, 4:35, and 8:10: "A Man Escaped" (1956, Robert Bresson). ♦ Aug. 20 at 3, 6:35, and 10:10: "Pickpocket" (1959, Bresson). ♦ Aug. 21 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "La Vérité" (1960, Henri-Georges Clouzot). ♦ Aug. 22-23 at 1, 5:25, and 9:50: "Pierrot le Fou" (1965, Jean-Luc Godard). ♦ Aug. 22-23 at 3:05 and 7:30: "Mississippi Mermaid" (1969, François Truffaut). ♦ Aug. 24 at 1:30, 5:35, and 9:40 and Aug. 25 at 1:30, 5:35, and 10: "Le Doulos" (1962, Jean-Pierre Melville). ♦ Aug. 24 at 3:35 and 7:30 and Aug. 25 at 3:35: "Classe Tous Risques" (1960, Claude Sautet). ♦ Aug. 25 at 7:30: "Coup de Torchon" (1981, Bertrand Tavernier). ♦ Aug. 26 at 1, 4:40, and 8:20: "Garde à Vue" (1981, Claude Miller). ♦ Aug. 26 at 2:40, 6:20, and 10: "The Clockmaker" (1974, Tavernier).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—In revival. Aug. 22-24 at 11 A.M.: "A Lesson in Love" (1954, Ingmar Bergman). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Aug. 22-23: "Maryjane" (1968, Maury Dexter).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Still Moving." Aug. 20-22 at 1:30: "I Vitelloni" (1953, Federico Fellini; in Italian). ♦ Aug. 20 at 6: "Flaming Creatures" (1963, Jack Smith) and "Scorpio Rising" (1963, Kenneth Anger). ♦ The films of Joel and Ethan Coen. Aug. 22 at 4:30: "Blood Simple" (1984). ♦ Aug. 22 at 6:30: "Raising Arizona" (1987). ♦ Aug. 25 at 6: "Barton Fink" (1991). ♦ Aug. 25 at 8:30: "The Hudsucker Proxy" (1994). ♦ "Salvador Dalí: Consumer/Consumed." Aug. 23 at 4: "Riders of the Purple Sage" (1925, Lynn Reynolds; silent). ♦ Aug. 23 at 5:30: "The White Sheik" (1952, Fellini; in Italian). ♦ Aug. 24 at 2: "Rear Window" (1954, Alfred Hitchcock). ♦ Aug. 24 at 4:30: "The Fountain" (2006, Darren Aronofsky).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Special screenings. Aug. 25 at 6:30: "Captain Ahab" (2007, Philippe Ramos; in French). ♦ "Lindsay Anderson: Revolutionary Romantic." Except where noted, all films are directed by Anderson. Aug. 20-21 at 3:50 and 8:45: "Never Apologize: A Personal Visit with Lindsay Anderson" (2007, Mike Kaplan). ♦ Aug. 20 at 6:30: "The Whales of August" (1987). ♦ Aug. 21 at 12:30: "O Lucky Man!" (1973). ♦ Aug. 21 at 6: "They Were Expendable" (†). ♦ The films of Roberto Gavaldón. All films are in Spanish unless otherwise noted. Aug. 22-23 at 2:15 and Aug. 27 at 6:15: "La Barraca" (1945). ♦ Aug. 22 at 4:30 and Aug. 24 and Aug. 28 at 6:15: "Macario" (1960). ♦ Aug. 22 at 6:30, Aug. 25 at 3:45, and Aug. 28 at 2:15: "Rosa Blanca" (1961/1972). ♦ Aug. 22 at 8:45, Aug. 24 at 4:30, and Aug. 26 at 2: "Night Falls" (1952). ♦ Aug. 23 at 4:30, Aug. 27 at 2:15, and Aug. 28 at 8:20: "Rosauro Castro" (1950). ♦ Aug. 23 at 6:30, Aug. 26 at 3:45, and Aug. 27 at 8:20: "The Golden Cockerel" (1964). ♦ Aug. 23 at 8:45 and Aug. 25 at 9: "The Other One" (1946). ♦ Aug. 24 at 2:30, Aug. 25 at 2, and Aug. 28 at 4:15: "The Littlest Outlaw" (1955; in English). ♦ Aug. 27 at 4:15: "Autumn Days" (1963).

READINGS AND TALKS

MCNALLY JACKSON BOOKS
The independent bookstore, which recently changed its name, presents a reading from the new anthology "Who Can Save Us Now? Brand-New Superheroes and Their Amazing (Short) Stories." The book's editors, Owen King and John McNally, will be joined by the contributors Kelly Braffet, Lauren Grodstein, and Scott Snyder. (52 Prince St. No tickets necessary. Aug. 20 at 7.)

MOUSTAFA BAYOUMI
Bayoumi, an associate professor of English at Brooklyn College, reads from his new book, "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America." (Barnes & Noble, Seventh Ave. at 6th St., Brooklyn. No tickets necessary. Aug. 20 at 7.)

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
The art historian Giovanna Assenso-Termini looks at how the wealthy relaxed and dined in ancient Rome. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3764. Aug. 24 at 1.)

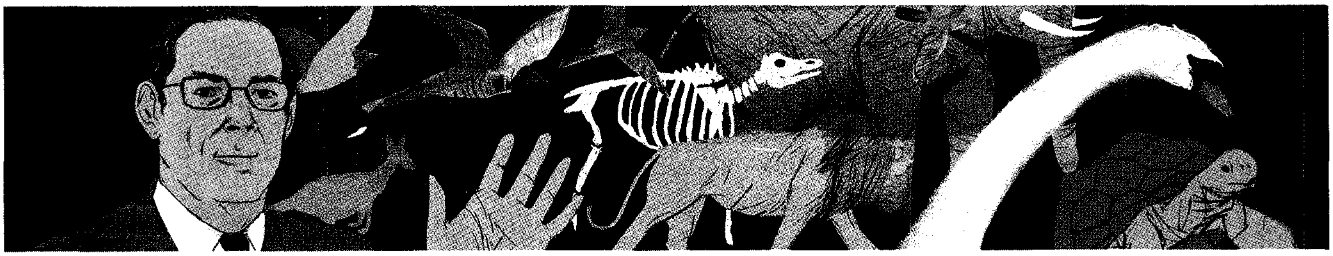
ABOVE AND BEYOND

RUMBLE IN THE (CONCRETE) JUNGLE
The Rumblers Car Club, a close-knit group of automobile enthusiasts founded by, among others, Roger Miret, a singer for the local hardcore punk band Agnostic Front, throws its eighth annual "Kustom Kills and Hot Rod Thrills" show. It is expected to draw some three hundred lead sleds, beaters, and other cars (all dating from before 1964) to a parking lot in Williamsburg beneath the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. And, in case the gleaming sheet metal, the smell of exhaust, and nostalgia for the days of cheap gas aren't enough of a lure, rockabilly bands are also scheduled to perform that afternoon at Union Pool, a nearby bar. (For more information, visit www.rumblersnyc.com. Aug. 23, starting at 10 A.M.)

RAMBLE IN THE GARDEN
For a slightly more refined outing, the Cloisters offers tours of its gardens Tuesdays through Sundays at 1. (For more information, visit www.metmuseum.org. Through Oct. 31.)

NEWYORKER.COM

Visit the Goings On blog, at www.newyorker.com/go/goingson, for additional cultural coverage and commentary.



JON HAN

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
AMERICAN DIRECTOR
Aug. 29–Sept. 1

Chris Smith, an independent director who began his career with the diptych-like pair of films "American Job" (a narrative fiction) and "American Movie" (a documentary), ranges quite a bit further afield for his latest film, "The Pool," which is a fictional project set in Panaji, in the Indian state of Goa. "The Pool" will be screened in première as part of a MOMA retrospective of Smith's work. (212-708-9480.)

THE THEATRE
FOR A KINGDOM
Sept. 12

Frank Langella stars as Sir Thomas More in Robert Bolt's "A Man for All Seasons," a role made famous by Paul Scofield. Doug Hughes directs the Roundabout Theatre Company production, at the American Airlines Theatre. (212-719-1300.)

NIGHT LIFE
FONT OF INSPIRATION
Sept. 13–28

The big summer festival season is over, but that just makes room for smaller gatherings. The Festival of New Trumpet Music, curated by its founder, Dave Douglas, along with Taylor Ho Bynum and Jeremy Pelt, features more than sixty trumpeters in venues around the city. (www.fontmusic.org.)

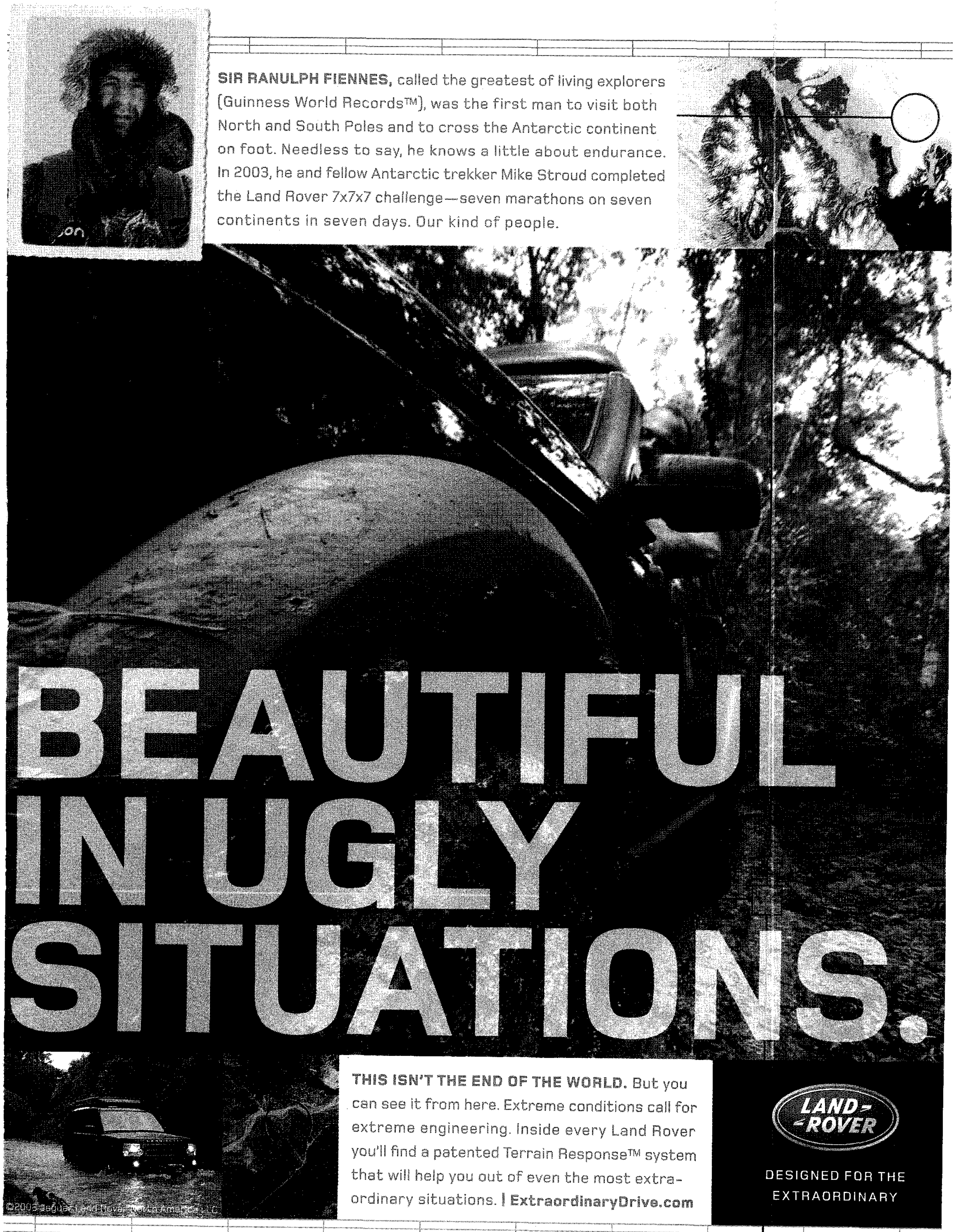
ART
ON THE ROAD
Sept. 14–Jan. 25

"Street Art, Street Life: From the 1950s to Now," at the Bronx Museum, will feature works by some thirty artists; on opening day, the museum will host a fair with performances, family activities, and street food. (718-681-6000.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
MUSIC AT THE CLOSE
Sept. 26

Philippe de Montebello is a gracious man, and the Metropolitan Museum is bidding its longstanding director farewell in a gracious manner. The musical tribute comes courtesy of Orpheus, which performs Saint-Saëns's "Carnival of the Animals" while de Montebello reads the witty poems that Ogden Nash wrote in 1949 to accompany the piece. (www.metmuseum.org.)

Saint-Saëns's "Carnival of the Animals," at the Metropolitan Museum.



SIR RANULPH FIENNES, called the greatest of living explorers (Guinness World Records™), was the first man to visit both North and South Poles and to cross the Antarctic continent on foot. Needless to say, he knows a little about endurance. In 2003, he and fellow Antarctic trekker Mike Stroud completed the Land Rover 7x7x7 challenge—seven marathons on seven continents in seven days. Our kind of people.

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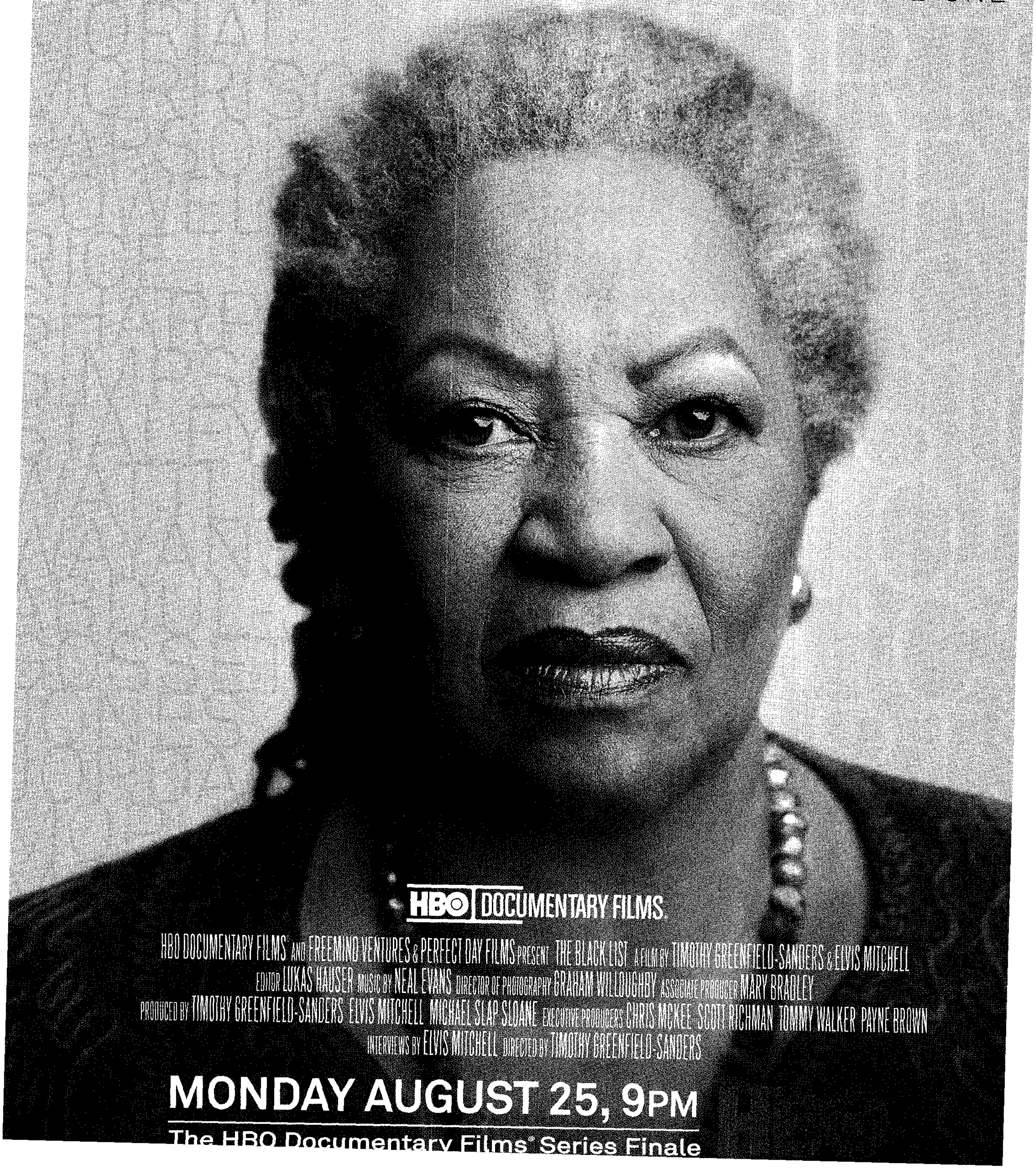
A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS & ELVIS MITCHELL

THE BLACK LIST

VOLUME ONE



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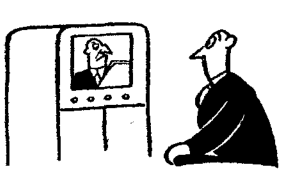


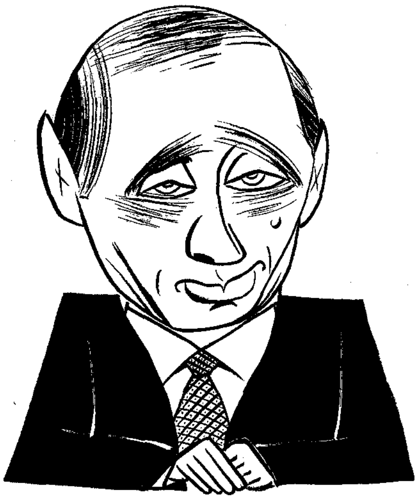
On a bright September day in 1993, not long before he ended his two decades in exile, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn delivered a rare public address in Vaduz, the capital of Liechtenstein. Although Solzhenitsyn was energetic at the lectern, he was all but finished with his epic work as the chronicler of Soviet cruelty. With "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," "Cancer Ward," "The First Circle," and, above all, "The Gulag Archipelago," Solzhenitsyn had not only exposed the secrets of Soviet oppression and ruin; he had also presaged the collapse of Communist ideology and Moscow's empire.

But, in Vaduz, Solzhenitsyn, a principled conservative, could not join in the West's euphoria. He was deeply aware that the costs of ideology, violence, and empire had not been paid in full. While American triumphalists were still indulging in clichés of how Ronald Reagan had won the Cold War, Solzhenitsyn anticipated the persistence of the old and unrepentant élites, the former Communist Party chiefs and K.G.B. officials who so easily transformed themselves into "democrats" and "businessmen":

> We were recently entertained by a naïve fable of the happy arrival at the "end of history," of the overflowing triumph of an all-democratic bliss; the ultimate global arrangement had supposedly been attained. But we all see and sense that something very different is coming, something new, and perhaps quite stern. No, tranquility does not promise to descend on our planet, and will not be granted us so easily.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Solzhenitsyn died on August 3rd, and he was buried near Turgenev in the graveyard of the Donskoi Monastery. Vladimir Putin, the former K.G.B. operative and Russia's de-facto President, unabashed by irony, paid tribute to Solzhenitsyn's service to "the ideals of freedom, justice, and humanism." Later that week, while attending the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Putin discussed with his seatmates and fellow heads of state a nonsporting matter: he had ordered his tanks and troop trucks into South Ossetia, in the Caucasus. His Army also attacked Georgia proper, most forcefully the city of Gori, the birthplace of Iosef Dzhugashvili—better known as Stalin, who in his day helped redraw the volatile mosaic of the Caucasus.



Part of the "naïve fable" was that the collapse of the Soviet Union would peaceably defy historical precedent. Empires, blinded by hauteur and ambition, don't often stoop to understand the complexities of their human and territorial acquisitions, and care even less about the disfigurements and time bombs they eventually leave behind. The record is long: after the Ottoman decline came the slaughter of Armenians and the drawing of senseless boundaries in the Middle East; imperial Britain left in its wake the wars in Ireland, Palestine, Nigeria, and the Indian subcontinent; the French provided a legacy of imminent violence from Algeria to Indochina.

Nor was the Soviet breakup the result of precision engineering; its dangers, similarly, were only briefly concealed. In December, 1991, at a vodka-soaked confab in a hunting lodge near the Polish border, the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine dissolved the union formed by the Bolsheviks and their tsarist predecessors, instantly depriving Mikhail Gorbachev of employment. "I well remember how a sensation of freedom and lightness suddenly came over me," Yeltsin wrote of the event. Putin, Yeltsin's successor, who spent the perestroika years seething with resentment as an intelligence officer in East Germany, saw it differently. Burning secret documents as the Berlin Wall fell, Putin felt abandoned by the Party and by the empire he had been brought up to protect; he later called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century."

Promises of a voluntary and effective commonwealth of liberated nations soon became a rueful memory. With the lonely exception of the Baltic states (particularly Estonia), democratic development came slowly and fitfully to the former republics, when it came at all. The Central Asian republics—the "stans"—ranged in political shape from a North Korean model in Turkmenistan to an oil autocracy in Kazakhstan run by a dynast from the Communist era. Belarus is run by a petty dictator, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who informed a German newspaper that "not everything connected with that well-known figure, Adolf Hitler, was bad." In Azerbaijan, the patriarch Heydar Aliyev, a K.G.B. general in his salad days, bequeathed the nation's throne to his son, Ilham. And so on. The levels of autocracy, criminality, tin-pot cronyism, and resurgent nationalisms emerged on such a heroic and ruinous scale that the historian Stephen Kotkin has referred to the less fortunate republics of the former Soviet Union as "Trashcanistans."

Moscow did not engage in large-scale violence in the post-Soviet realm until 1994, but, not surprisingly, when it did it centered on the Caucasus—for centuries a cauldron of ethnic emotion and battle. By levelling the Chechen capital, Grozny, Yeltsin reënacted the tragedy of Lyndon Johnson, a politician whose early liberal intentions were overwhelmed by his commitment to a senseless and unwinnable war. Vladimir Putin has none of Yeltsin's democratic pretensions. His focus is Russian power and its reëstablishment. And, even as the world rightly condemns his ruthless invasion of Georgia, imagining the world as he sees it is a worthwhile exercise.

Taken individually, the West's actions since the collapse of the Soviet Union—from the inclusion of the Baltic and the Central European states in NATO to the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state—can be rationalized on strategic and moral grounds. But taken together these actions were bound to engender deep-seated feelings of national resentment among Russians, especially as, through the nineteen-nineties, they suffered an unprecedentedly rapid downward spiral. Even ordinary Russians find it mightily trying to be lectured on questions of sovereignty and moral diplomacy by the West, particularly the United States, which, even before Iraq, had a long history of foreign intervention, overt and covert—politics by other means. After the exposure of the Bush Administration's behavior prior to the invasion of Iraq and its unapologetic use of torture, why would any leader, much less Putin, respond to moral suasion from Washington? That is America's tragedy, and the world's.

There is little doubt that the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, provided Putin with his long-awaited casus belli when he ordered the shelling of South Ossetia, on August 7th. But Putin's war, of course, is not about the splendors of South Ossetia, a duchy run by the Russian secret service and criminal gangs. It is a war of demonstration. Putin is demonstrating that he is willing to use force; that he is unwilling to let Georgia and Ukraine enter NATO without exacting a severe price; and that he views the United States as hypocritical, overextended, distracted, and reluctant to make good on its protective assurances to the likes of Georgia.

Inevitably, a number of neoconservative commentators, along with John McCain, have rushed in to analyze this conflict using familiar analogies: the Nazi threat in the late nineteen-thirties; the Soviet invasions of Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. But while Putin's actions this past week have inspired genuine alarm in Kiev and beyond, such analogies can lead to heedless policy. As the English theologian Bishop Joseph Butler wrote, "Every thing is what it is, and not another thing." Cartoonish rhetoric only contributes to the dangerous return of what some conservatives seem to crave—the other, the enemy, the us versus them of the Cold War.

Only one with a heart of stone could fail to be moved by the spectacle of the leaders of Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states standing by Saakashvili last week at a rally in Tbilisi. But Putin is not Hitler or Stalin; he is not even Leonid Brezhnev. He is what he is, and that is bad enough. In the 2008 election, he made a joke of democratic procedure and, in effect, engineered for himself an anti-constitutional third term. The press, the parliament, the judiciary, the business élite are all in his pocket—and there is no opposition. But Putin also knows that Russia cannot bear the cost of reconstituting empire or the gulag. It depends on the West as a market. One lesson of the Soviet experience is that isolation ends in poverty. Putin's is a new and subtler game: he is the autocrat who calls on the widow of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. To deal with him will require statecraft of a kind that has proved well beyond the capacities of our current practitioners.

—*David Remnick*

INK
HIT MAN

Jerry Corsi, from New Jersey, picked up his phone in Room 2743 at the Hilton, on Sixth Avenue, last Wednesday afternoon, and said, "Oh, Lou, it's great to be back with you, Lou," as though he were talking to an old pal. He was speaking to Lou Dobbs—live, on the radio, where he is known as Dr. Jerome R. Corsi—and he was holding a copy of that morning's *Times*, which featured a front-page story about his new book, "The Obama Nation" (say it fast), which débuted at No. 1 on the paper's best-seller list. "Yes, the New York *Times* is not very fond of me today," Corsi told Dobbs, in a conspiratorial tone. Tim Bueler, Corsi's publicist and a former Mike Huckabee staffer, scrambled into the bathroom to field a cell-phone call from a CNN producer. The previous night, Corsi had appeared on Fox News. (Sean Hannity: "Do we know if he ever sold drugs?" Corsi: "I raise that question.")

Selling books can be tedious, but Corsi, who worked in the financial-services industry for nearly twenty-five years, seemed to bring actuarial relish to the routine, including among his talking points the number of pages (three hundred) and footnotes (six hundred and eighty) in "The Obama Nation." "I've written eight books in the last four years, and four of them have been New York *Times* best-sellers," he said. Corsi is a short, barrel-chested man with white hair and a pink face. He held a copy of the new release and turned to the page marked "Also by Jerome R. Corsi, PH.D." (Harvard, political science, 1972.) Using a black pen, he drew check marks next to two of the titles: "The Late Great U.S.A." and "Showdown with Nuclear Iran." These, he said, had been on the so-called extended list that you don't see printed in the Sunday *Book Review*. He wrote "#1" beside "Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry," which he co-authored with his friend John O'Neill, whom he met at an intercollegiate-debate competition in the nineteen-sixties. To his usual audience of red-meat conservatives, he believed, he had added a new readership in the form of angry Democrats "holding on to the hope that Hillary may at the last minute be the nominee," he said. "They're probably overlooking, or not focussing on, what I wrote in 2004."

Corsi is in some ways an unlikely scourge of the left. He lives in Morris County, where his wife runs a house-cleaning service, and his father, to whom he dedicated "The Obama Nation," worked for the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and was involved in Democratic politics. Young Jerry, by contrast, was "always more inclined to like Republicans," he recalled. He said that he was six years old when he began to question his father's admiration for Adlai Stevenson. These days, he finds the leading Republicans' positions on border control and globalization unpalatable, and last year he contemplated running for President on the Constitution Party ticket, with a platform that focussed on illegal immigration. Experience with the cleaning business in New Jersey was apparently not a motivating factor. "My wife doesn't compete on price," he said. "She has a quality service." (Her company's Web site refers to "an employee training program that stresses European methods for obtaining meticulous cleaning results.")

Many of Corsi's convictions about Obama, as with Kerry, grew out of postgraduate research on race riots and the Vietnam War opposition. "My wife always says I wrote that book from the attic, because I had kept all my research," he said of "Unfit for Command." (She, presumably, didn't mean this as a compliment.) "When Obama mentions that he read Frantz Fanon, you know, I've read part of Frantz Fanon in *French*," Corsi said. He also insisted on the French pronunciation of the name Du Bois, as in, "I have a set of W. E. B. Du Bois volumes and have read them extensively."

At three o'clock, Corsi hadn't yet left the hotel, and he was dressed in his radio clothes: blue blazer, pocket square, light khakis, black lace-ups. He had an appointment to tape a segment for Anderson Cooper and, later, for Larry King, so he changed into a business suit, with a red tie. Then he and Bueler headed down to the lobby to await their black car for the six-block trip to CNN. Bueler listened to a message from Mary Matalin, at Corsi's publishing house, who wanted to compare notes on the main themes of attack being levelled against them. (Corsi cited "nitpicking" and "name-calling.") At CNN, a TV screen in the elevator showed footage of Obama in Hawaii. "He picked a bad week to go on vacation," Bueler said. "By Friday, we'll have done a hundred and twenty shows."

—*Ben McGrath*

OLYMPICS POSTCARD
BUG WARS

Kari Heliövaara is the head of forest entomology at the University of Helsinki and the co-author of a standard text, entitled "Insects and Pollution." A Finn, he has nonetheless spent a good deal of the past decade working in China. "Control strategy"—how to stop insects from killing trees—is one of Heliövaara's areas of expertise, and he was recently part of a team hired to prevent an ongoing eco-catastrophe from marring the Olympics in Beijing.

For years, a blight had ravaged nearly all the deciduous trees in Beijing, leaving the branches naked and ugly. Civic leaders were worried, in the run-up to the Games, what the bare trees would say about their city's environmental problems. So, a couple of years ago, they approached the Beijing Forestry University and the Chinese Academy of Forestry and asked if a way could be found to put the leaves back. The Chinese experts—many of whom had worked with or studied under Heliövaara—turned to the Finn for assistance. Heliövaara signed on, and, after he and the scientists discovered that the larvae of moths and sawflies were causing the problem, he helped launch a project called Green Beijing.

"Chemical control was possible but ecologically not recommended," Heliövaara said the other day. "Precisely planned biological control is much more effective." Biological control, in this context, means rearing parasites that attack only the defoliating pests. "This is very challenging, and is based on a high level of taxonomic know-how, " he went on.

He explained how to create an antidote to an infestation: "First, you catch a female moth by net. Second, you catch a male moth using either natural female pheromones or artificial pheromones as a lure. The female moth mates with the male and produces eggs. After a few days, larvae hatch. Then the larvae are infected by parasitic wasps. This is where taxonomic knowledge is crucial. You need to infect the larvae with exactly the correct kind of parasite."

Heliövaara is, in many respects, a typical Finn, wry and dry and proud. He owns a boat, and, in the summer, sails the Baltic with his family. But nothing excites him as much as talking about insects. "The larval stage takes one month, after which a larva pupates and makes a cocoon," he continued. "The pupal stage takes another month, and if the larva has been successfully infected, if the female wasp laid her eggs there, only parasites will emerge from the cocoon. The parasites then attack and kill the larvae you're trying to get rid of."

Thus, in a mind-boggling and slightly James Bondish fashion, carefully orchestrated insect warfare is set in motion. Over the past decade, Heliövaara and Professor Yang Zhong-qi, of the Chinese Academy of Forestry, have developed this method in a fight against the Siberian moth, which had laid waste to millions of acres of forest in China's northern provinces. But, given the tight deadline of the Olympics, new laboratories were required for the mass rearing of parasite-infected cocoons.

"They built about twenty huge buildings, in and around Beijing," Heliövaara said. "Inside each lab are many rearing rooms, and thousands of larvae are feeding in each room simultaneously. Parasites are released into the rooms to lay their eggs in the larvae."

Last summer, Green Beijing had a successful trial run: leaves returned to deciduous trees in the control area within weeks. So millions more parasite-infected cocoons were prepared, and in May of this year, and again in July, an army of more than a thousand Chinese students, supervised by entomologists, went from tree to tree all over Beijing, putting cocoons on two hundred thousand trees. Each one was attached to the bark by means of a brass screw, the metal piercing only the edge of the cocoon, so that the parasites teeming inside weren't damaged. Within weeks, about twenty thousand parasites emerged from each cocoon, swarming through the trees and killing the moth and sawfly larvae before the pests could eat up all the foliage.

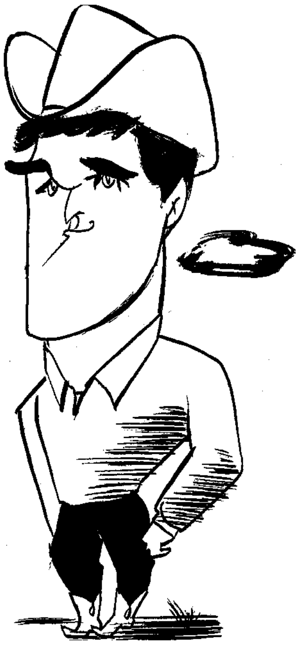
Heliövaara has been watching the Olympics on television, and he's pleased with his work. "It is difficult to see the cocoons on the trees," he said. "But the trees look great on TV. Beijing is green."

—*Richard Rayner*

REAL MAN DEPT.
WHERE'S THE BEEF?

As our thoughts turn to Denver, it's tempting to imagine that the political stagecraft on view will be different this time—that after eight years of watching our leaders hunting quail and clearing brush in front of television cameras the country will have got over its thing for cowboy statesmen. Wrangling, roping, and a fondness for pork rinds no longer seem like the best indicators for leadership abilities.

As it happens, a cowboy arrived in New York last week: Scott Kleeb, a thirty-two-year-old senatorial candidate from Nebraska. Kleeb (pronounced "Kleb") is best known, among Nebraska liberals, for being a bright, blue hope in a red state: a charismatic beef farmer with a Ph.D. from Yale. To others, he's the guy who was sabotaged, during his first congressional campaign, in 2006, by a series of fake middle-of-the-night robo-calls, which greeted groggy voters with a recording of his voice: "Hi, this is Scott Kleeb!" (The investigation concluded this year; the calls couldn't be traced.) He's also known, locally, for having defeated his current opponent, the ex-Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns, in a milking contest (painful, since Johanns is the son of a dairy farmer). And congressional-race watchers call him "the hot rancher": Kleeb is six feet three, and he tends to wear tight Wranglers for publicity shoots. He looks, it has been pointed out on political blogs, something like the young David Hasselhoff.



Scott Kleeb

Last Wednesday, the fund-raising group Think Blue hosted a cocktail party in Kleeb's honor in a Chelsea apartment. The invitation urged guests to welcome "our favorite Democratic cowboy": "Enjoy BBQ and an ice cold beer or stick to wine and cheese. . . . Your call, just leave the bull riding to the candidate (seriously, he knows how)." There were chicken wings, sausages, and buckets of beer. (Earlier, Kleeb had eaten a bacon burger at Ted's Montana Grill with a Nebraskan pal from the Willa Cather Foundation.) Someone was selling twenty-dollar tank tops that said "I Only Sleep with Democrats." Kleeb stood off to the side, his thumbs hooked in the front pockets of his Wranglers. He had on a striped cowboy shirt and dusty boots. He opened a bottle of Rolling Rock with a lighter.

"He's the most all-American candidate I've ever met," Sarah Rothman, a public-relations executive, said. "It seems like he's a real man of the people."

Risa Whipple, who works at the National Lacrosse League, said she had come because of "the picture on the e-mail."

"Yeah," her friend Jill Eisenpress, a senior research manager at Hachette, said. "He brings a little bit of good-lookingness to the whole political scene."

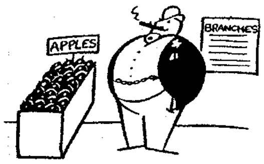
A circle formed around Kleeb, and someone tried to hand him a microphone, which he waved off. "I don't do as well with these things," he said. He talked about the problems with privatized health care and the need to let "Iraqi folks" take control of their own government. "Support the troops doesn't mean give 'em a bunch of rhetoric and then cut out their benefits," he said. "It means working to pass fundamental ways to make change." And he made references to his childhood: he grew up moving with his parents from one military base to another and spent time with his grandparents in Broken Bow, Nebraska. Then, in 1998, he started working summers on a ranch while getting his Ph.D., in American history. As part of his dissertation research, he spent a year living in his old pickup and driving around to state parks. Once, he was chased by a bear. The thesis topic? "The Atlantic West: Cowboys, Capitalists and the Making of an American Myth." "What's interesting is we tend to think about the cowboy as being this iconic American image, but in reality he resold his cattle globally, and he was part of the world economy," Kleeb said. He does something similar, raising organic Kobe beef, which he sells to restaurants in Los Angeles and Europe. "I spend my days doing paperwork," he said.

"I think there's a misunderstanding of people in the cattle industry," Kleeb went on. "A cowboy is somebody who's concerned with things in the world in which he lives." He elaborated: "The creak of leather as you're riding a horse. The shadows as the sun sets. Dew on a cow's back. The smell of rain. The smell of cut hay." Of his fellow-ranchers, he said, "They're just hardworking people who want nothing more out of life than to get a better future for their kids. That's no different from folks here. There are a lot of people who watch the sun rise in these tall buildings, and watch the sun go down."

—Lizzie Widdicombe

MOVING UP

YOU SAY TOMATO



The Amagansett Farmers Market used to be the sort of place where you bought tomatoes, not heirlooms, nothing was described as artisanal, and if you needed some Clorox or a newspaper you could find that, too. But last year Pat Struk, who started the market in 1954, decided that she had had enough, and she didn't open up as usual this spring. She had put the business, along with nine acres of farmland behind it, up for sale. Margaret de Cuevas, a local conservationist, bought it in coöperation with the town and leased it to the Peconic Land Trust, which pledged to continue operating the place as a farmers' market selling local produce. The trust then subleased the parcel to Eli Zabar, which a lot of people took as one more sign that the Hamptons had given up any pretense of being anything other than an extremely inconvenient suburb of Manhattan, populated by people who think nothing of spending five dollars for a tomato. Zabar's three gourmet stores in Manhattan—E.A.T., the Vinegar Factory, and Eli's Manhattan—are not the sort of places people dash into to buy soap. Imported organic truffles are more in his line.

Zabar was determined to renovate and reopen the market by the beginning of August, and he made it, sort of. On August 1st, Zabar put an "Open" sign out front, and set up a stand with coffee, bagels, and pastry, so that the tradition of eating breakfast on the grass next to the market could resume. Inside, construction crews were hammering, and employees were stocking refrigerator cases with prepared foods that had been shipped from Zabar's city stores, which many locals did not consider a good sign. Neither was the fact that the cashiers seemed to have no idea what the prices were. Zabar, a short, youngish-looking man with gray hair and a lot of nervous energy, paced around, talking on his cell phone and greeting customers, many of whom he knew from Manhattan. The place had the air of a dress rehearsal, with the customers playing themselves.

A man walked up to the register holding a small box of heirloom tomatoes and a head of lettuce. "How much are these tomatoes?" the cashier asked, directing the question to anyone within range of his voice. "Seven ninety-nine a pound," a woman said. The cashier weighed the tomatoes, and told the man that the price of his box, which contained about five small tomatoes, would be $14.49.

"This is beginning to feel like Loans and Finances," said a man in line behind the tomato buyer, referring to Loaves and Fishes, a Hamptons gourmet shop that is not known for its bargain prices.

"I'm actually not sure that I really want these tomatoes," the first man said. The cashier started to put them aside, and the second man reached for them. "I'll offer you fifty cents for these tomatoes," he told the cashier. "After all, they're used."

A few days later, when things were quieter, Zabar gave a visitor a tour. "The Amagansett Farmers Market was a big customer of my bread business, and when they didn't place an order this year I wondered what was going on," he said. "Well, the moment I heard that it was closed I said this market was exactly what I want to do. We have a house in Provence and we usually go for most of the summer, but I've really never been happy doing nothing in the summer.

"I have two trucks here, and they do their rounds every morning to all the farms," he went on. "Marilee Foster came in and gave us five pounds of these organic flat beans," he said. "I am the only one buying from all these sources, and it's an enormous effort. We're not going to make money on most of this produce."

As Zabar walked past the blueberries ($4 a pint, from the Milk Pail, a farm stand in Water Mill), he stuck his hand into one of the open boxes, grabbed a handful of berries, and put them in his mouth. "I could only get four quarts of these, so that's what I bought," he said. He looked across the aisle to a display of cherry tomatoes ($7.99 a pound). He stared at them, and began to scowl.

"These are overripe and they're breaking down," he said. He turned to an employee who was stocking a shelf. "Take all these cherry tomatoes away," Zabar said.

"We're not going to be all things to all people," he said. "I'm trying to be the common man, but the shoe doesn't fit me so well. I told them to make all the carpentry rough-hewn, to keep the feeling of a farm stand, and I bought this eleven-year-old refrigerator unit for the lettuce, so it would feel more old-fashioned. I'm not going to carry Tampax and aspirin, no matter what. But the challenge is going to be to not let it all get too fancy."

—Paul Goldberger

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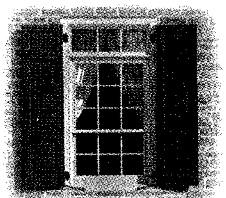

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LETTER FROM BEIJING

THE ONLY GAMES IN TOWN

Week One at the Olympics.

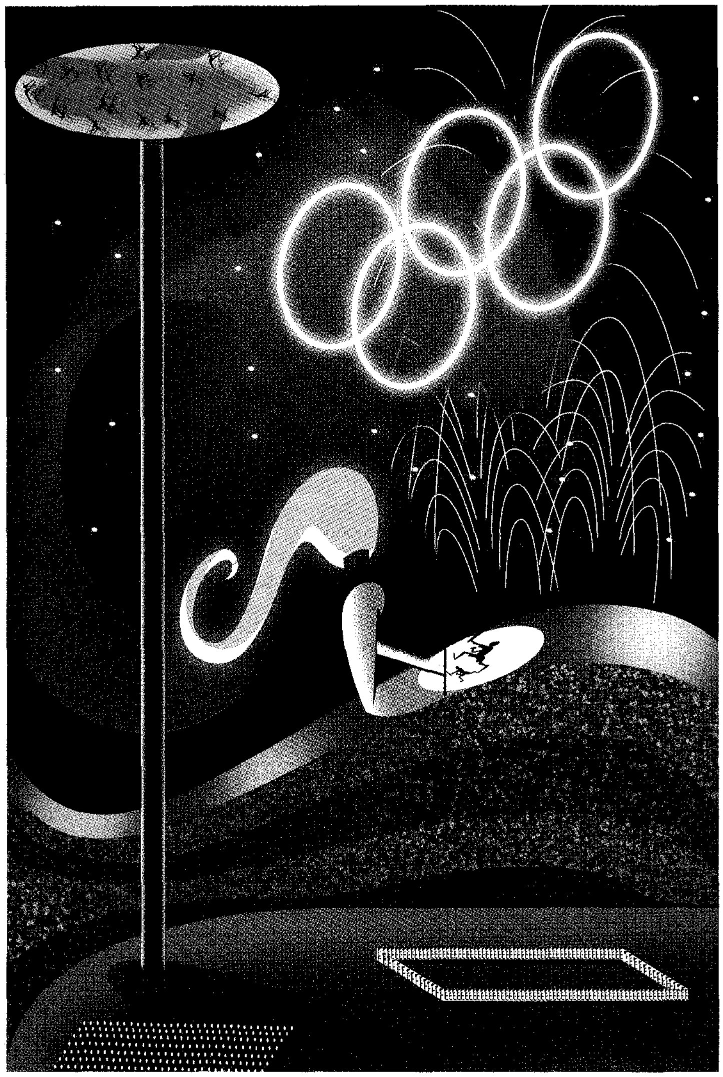
BY ANTHONY LANE

According to Pythagoras, there were three types of men, just as there were three types of visitors to the Olympic Games. First and lowest were those who came to sell. Next, halfway up, were the competitors. And last, at the top of the pile, were the people who wanted to watch. The more you look at this ranking, the better it gets. Applied to life, it means a shoo-in for the slacker, the couch potato, and the tremulous voyeur. Applied to the Olympic Games, it makes it simpler for ordinary mortals to gaze upon Michael Phelps—half man, half osprey, with a wingspan three inches greater than his height. "To be honest, I had no idea I was going to go that fast," he said, addressing a press conference as if it were a bunch of traffic cops. The date was August 10th, the place was Beijing, and Phelps had just spent a relaxing Sunday morning in the pool, slicing more than a second off his own world record. The event was the men's four-hundred-metre individual medley, in which swimmers are encouraged to prove that, short of dropping depth charges, there is nothing they can't do in the water. Nonetheless, all Phelps did was take a dip, whereas those of us lining the National Aquatics Center were the gods of the Games, the spectators, and that lifted us higher than him. Ask Pythagoras.

The victory was not without its hiccups. Phelps stepped onto the winner's podium, flanked by his compatriot Ryan Lochte, who had taken the bronze. (It's the old Ben Jonson problem: you're a fine playwright, and at any other time you'd be the best, but by lousy luck you happen to overlap with Shakespeare, who takes gold in every medley in town.) It was time for the winner's national anthem, which began with an ominous pop, settled down for a while, gathered itself for the finale, and then stopped. We got the land of the free, but apparently the home of the brave was no longer available. Did someone foreclose? Accidents will happen, but, as a rule, if you're going to screw up the national anthem of another country, especially a major trading partner, try not to do so when the President of that country is in the audience. George W. Bush was indeed in the Aquatics Center, standing at attention, and, even across ten lanes of water, I could tell that I was looking at a confused man. Was this insult calculated, and how should he react? The world held its breath. Somewhere nearby was a briefcase with the nuclear launch codes, possibly held by a man wearing trunks. The crisis passed. The President sat down. The semifinals of the women's hundred-metre butterfly got under way. As for the Assistant Button-Pressing Technical Manager for National Anthem Digital Recording Systems (Aquatic Branch), I don't know the poor fellow's name, but his extended family has just been rehoused inside a hydroelectric dam.

The first week of the twenty-ninth Olympiad of the modern era, and the first to be held in China, was always going to be sprinkled with diplomatic tensions. Most were quickly diffused, and many were highly enjoyable. If, during the United States basketball team's casual flattening of their Chinese opponents on Sunday night, you could bear to glance away from LeBron James and up to the stands, there was an exquisite awkwardness to be seen in the gestures of Yang Jiechi, the Chinese minister of foreign affairs, who was seated next to President Bush. As a matter of etiquette, how excitedly, if at all, should you applaud when your home team scores, given that your honored guest is of the enemy camp? Will the pride of that guest receive a dent? Even when Yao Ming, whose status in China is roughly equivalent to that of Simba at the end of "The Lion King," opened the scoring in less than a minute, and the whole place went nuts, Yang contented himself with a few soft palm-pats, just above his knees, and soon after that went into a permanent freeze of geniality.

To be fair, he had had a difficult weekend. On Saturday the ninth, the first full day of the Games, word came through of a stabbing. It turned out that Todd Bachman, the father-in-law of the U.S. men's volleyball coach, had been killed, and his wife, Barbara, severely injured, by a Chinese man. Later, an American couple, one of them an employee at the U.S. Embassy, told me how dismayed they were by the way the story spread, in particular by the rolling headline on a news Web site: "American killed at Olympics." "No, he wasn't," the wife said, and she was right: the couple wore nothing to identify them as Americans, and they were attacked at the Drum Tower, two miles south of the Olympic Green. Still, back home, the connection had been made: China was a danger zone. Among visitors to Beijing, there was a touch of sympathy for the Chinese, who were reminded the hard way, and at the worst time, that you can build a wall against organized threats from without but cannot legislate for the lone wretch with a knife who lurks within. Wang Wei, the executive vice-president and secretary general of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games, said in response, "We are living in a world where surprises do happen." True enough, although his next phrase seemed to hail from a different world: "We reassure you that nothing like this is going to happen again." It is the imprint of certainty—the implication that fate itself can be bent back into position—that rings oddly in more jaded ears. The American swimmer Larsen Jensen was asked, after taking a bronze in the four-hundred-metre freestyle, if he had been nervous before the race. He said not: "That's what my father taught me. Only worry about the things you can control." The horse sense of Mr. Jensen, Sr., would not pass muster with the authorities in Beijing, where they try to control things until the worry goes away.

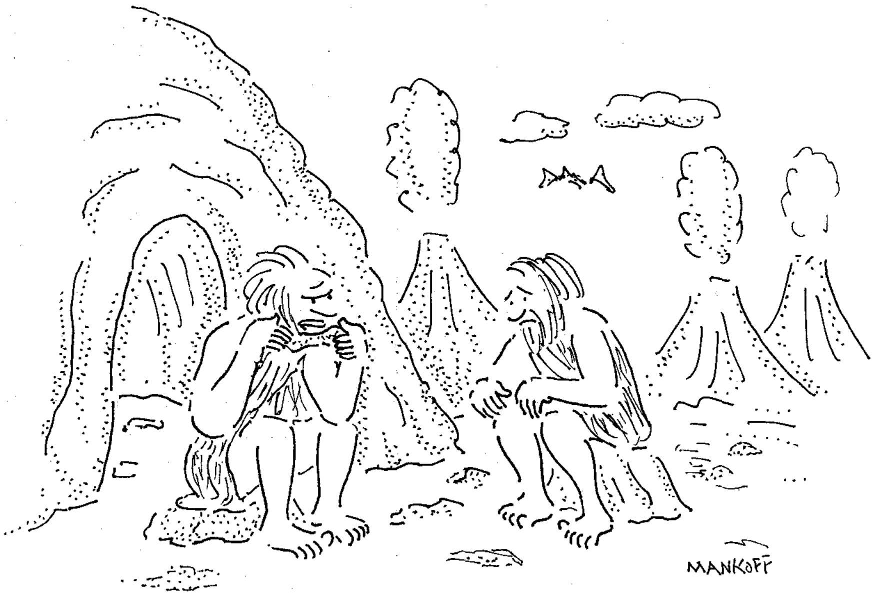


The opening ceremony offered the sight of mass humanity as mass art.

ROBERT RISKO

That is why the murder was a shock to the Olympic system. We know, in the end, that a sense of security is always false, yet the Beijing authorities had strained every sinew to tell us otherwise—to convince us, and themselves, that we had landed in a safe place. On the principle that every Western visitor is a sucker, to be wooed into believing that the grass is greener inside the fence, they made sure that security measures were not hammered home like rivets but tricked out with homely detail. To leave your hotel in the morning and have your bag and your person searched before you board a bus to the Olympic Green, as if it were a plane, is no hardship; indeed, from a professional point of view, to be felt up and patted down with such eager regularity has given me the first, helpful hint as to what life was like for Jean Harlow. And who would be left unmoved by the fake red velvet, edged in gold, that bedecks the plastic tray on which you are invited to lay your wallet? It was the same at Beijing Airport: the first thing I saw on arrival was a sniffer dog, but instead of some lunging German shepherd, with streaks of Baskerville-style foam along its jaws, there was a beagle. Now, beagles have been sniffing around U.S. airports for years, but this one was chasing a *rubber ball.* Running behind, at the end of its tether, was the dog's keeper, laughing gaily, and behind him, somewhere in the seven years since Beijing won the Olympic bid, was a committee dedicated solely to canine propaganda. As long as one mutt-fancier from the tenderhearted West caught sight of the romping beagle and exclaimed to her husband, "Oh, look at little Snu Pi! See, they don't eat them, they play with them!," the committee's job was done.

The apotheosis of this effort was the opening ceremony at the National Stadium, on the evening of August 8th. I arrived well in time for the crash course in audience participation. "The world has given its love and trust to China, and today China will give the world a big warm hug," one of the masters of ceremonies said. While admiring their faultless English, you had to wonder why they had chosen to learn it by watching "Barney's Great Adventure." How, in less than twenty years, does a place go from mowing down student dissent with tanks to offering unconditional hugs? Was this a front, or had the government realized that the patois of mushy togetherness is now a lingua franca, not least in commercials, and thus well worth acquiring? On every seat was a sack of goodies, and we were duly taught to rattle our drums, wave our Chinese flags, shake our funky light sticks, and



"Look, life is nasty, brutish, and short, but you knew that when you became a caveman."

• •

finally, at the avian highlight of the ceremony, "imitate the movement of the doves with your hands." Aside from the risk of developing repetitive wing injury, this was all too peaceful for me, and I felt a sudden, heretical yearning for the Paris Olympics of 1900, when the shooting competition used live pigeons. Twenty-one of them were blasted out of the skies by the gold medallist alone, and were presumably last seen heading for the kitchens of the Tour d'Argent. I prayed for something similar on the archery field, when a photographer strayed too close to the targets during the qualifying rounds, but a voice barked from the public-address system—"Please stand down"—and the chance was lost.

In the National Stadium, as the sky darkened and eight o'clock approached, a multitude of figures scuttled forward, each wheeling what appeared to be an outsized laundry basket. For a second, I feared a monstrous pantomime: would a clown burst forth from every basket, tripping over a pile of sheets? I need not have fretted. They weren't baskets; they were illuminated drums. Cometh the hour, cometh the glowing red drumsticks, the heaving sea of blocks, the Brobdingnagian scroll unspooling before our eyes, and other miracles of visual manipulation. In the course of a long evening, billions of viewers were induced not so much to revise their opinion of China as to realize that its formidable manpower could be harnessed to the cause of astonishment. China supports a population of 1.3 billion, and the knowledge of that resource was never far away; indeed, the whole evening became an exercise in number-crunching, as mass art was constructed from a mass of humanity. One townful of men and women would race on, swarm into a shape, and race off, to be replaced by the next; if, deep below the spectacle, there was an unspoken suggestion that it would be an extremely bad idea to go to war against this nation, it never rose to the surface, although one aerial travelling shot of fireworks exploding in sequence along the street leading up to the stadium, displayed for us on screens inside, was a ringer for bombing-run footage from the Vietnam War.

The obvious precedent for Beijing was the Berlin Olympics, in 1936. Both were showcases for a muscle-flexing nation, although Hitler made an elementary error when he chose not to dress his young National Socialists in lime-green catsuits laced with twinkling fairy lights. By a careful choice of color scheme, China was able to draw the sting from any accusations of militarism, while rarely permitting the result to slide into camp. Whereas the organizers of the Sydney Olympics, in 2000, served up bicycling prawns without a murmur, this was a serious spectacle, and its climax—Li Ning, a former Olympic gymnast and now the owner of a leading sportswear brand, loping through the midnight air, in slow motion, around the inner rim of the stadium—was a pure crystallization of Chinese intent, the entrepreneurial fused with the wondrous. Shares in Li's company soared like the man himself, and that one night reportedly made his life sweeter by thirty million dollars.

Like Berlin's ceremony, Beijing's was entwined with cinema, and with the great expectations that movies leave in our mind's eye. The German Games were filmed by Leni Riefenstahl, and shaped into "Olympia" (1938), just as the Nuremberg rallies were commemorated—and their full meaning revealed—in her 1935 "Triumph of the Will." The artistic director of this year's ceremony was Zhang Yimou, recently the director of "Hero" and "House of Flying Daggers." His films have been dreamily beautiful from the start, and, in a sense, to go from "Raise the Red Lantern," in 1991, to raising one vast, glowing, earthlike lantern from the bowels of the National Stadium, with people standing on it at every angle, like the Little Prince, is not so surprising a progression. But there was a time, too, when Zhang made trouble for the Chinese authorities, who banned him from accepting a prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994, and when his movies stared hard at the problems of individual folk. He has softened since then, becoming a dazzling arranger of hue and motion, and is now the favored son of his homeland, but we no longer watch his work for the depth of the characters, any more than we do Riefenstahl's. We watch them both and ask ourselves, what kind of society is it that can afford to make patterns out of its people? India is hugely populous, too, but a Delhi opening ceremony would be a more rambunctious affair. Nobody will ever surpass the mathematical majesty of that night in Beijing, and, in retrospect, that may be a good thing.

It will be scant consolation, however, to Lord Coe. Formerly Sebastian Coe, part of the shining generation of British middle-distance runners in the nineteen-eighties, he now heads the team that will bring the Olympics to London in 2012. I tried to pick him out among the V.I.P.s on that first Friday, but without success. He may have been hiding in the men's room, calling home to order more light bulbs. You can imagine the rising panic in his voice: "They had two thousand and eight drummers, all lit up. Yes, two thousand and eight. And what have we got so far? Elton John on a trampoline." I trust that he emerged in time to enjoy the parade of national squads from participating countries, all two hundred and four of them, serenaded by unlikely bands: bagpipes for Monaco, naturally, and a burst of mariachi music for the entrance of the Samoans.

A new academic discipline suggested itself: acoustipolitics, founded on the statistical correlation between the size of a cheer and the current state of relations between any given nation and its host. Thus, the Chinese roar for Pakistan far outstripped its muted reception of India, echoing a preference that harks back to the Cold War. The American team was greeted with an indecipherable blizzard of white noise. The flag-bearer for Guam was lauded wholly, and deservedly, for being enormous; most of the female gymnasts could get a good night's sleep inside one of his shoes. A storm of applause even met Vladimir Putin as he rose to wave at his compatriots. He wore the polite smile of a man who knew—as the crowd did not yet know—that he had just dispatched his armored divisions to quell a vexatious neighbor. No doubt he was musing upon the wise words of Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who had opened the proceedings, in a recorded speech, requesting all nations at war to lay down their arms and thus observe "the Olympic Truce." At least it was holding on the stadium field, where more than fifteen thousand bodies mixed and shimmered, girdled by an unbreakable ring of young women in short white tennis skirts, whose smiling never ceased. In less than ten hours, tiny Chinese weight lifters would start picking up lumps of metal as heavy as the man from Guam and holding them over their heads. The Games were under way.

There was much wrangling, ahead of the festivities, over the quality of the air. In all honesty, though, the atmosphere is not that bad: recent analysis uncovered a quantitative ratio of eighty-five per cent nitrogen, ten per cent carbon dioxide, four per cent oxygen, and one per cent vichyssoise. On the first day of competition, I watched the cyclists pass through Tiananmen Square, near the start of their road race, and none of them seemed in danger of expiring. Logic suggested that they zip up the east side of the square, since they were heading that way anyhow, but politics demanded that they take the western route, and then hang a right. This allowed them to pass in a pretty blur beneath the portrait of Mao Zedong, who, having overseen the deaths of up to seventy million of his countrymen (and having earned a spot on their banknotes for his pains), was more than happy to survey a handful of fat-free Spaniards in red-and-yellow spandex. I watched the speeding procession in the company of the strapping Goss family, from Amsterdam, all of them rabid fans of volleyball. How did they rate the Dutch chances this year? "We have no volleyball team," Mr. Goss said, with infinite gloom. The Netherlands hadn't qualified. The Gosses would have to make do with the beach equivalent, which is to proper volleyball what Elvis's movies were to Elvis's music.

I hope that the Gosses dropped in to the Aquatics Center, the blue quilted cube at the heart of the Olympic Green, to see four of their compatriots win the women's four-by-one-hundred-metre freestyle relay—their first gold in the event since Berlin, in 1936. Relays, whether in the pool or on the track, are never a disappointment, in part because of the winners' communal delirium: replays showed Marleen Veldhuis, who swam a storming final leg for the Netherlands, leaping improbably high from the water to punch the air when the official result flashed up. When Olympic swimming dries up for Veldhuis, as it must, she can always get a job at SeaWorld in Orlando, launching herself out of the deep end to take a herring with her front teeth from a nervous guy on a ladder. But relays compel us, too, because they forge a brief, comic link with our own fumbling experience of competition; one of the final track events at the Olympics is the four by four hundred metres, just as it is in high-school meets, and when the American sprinters loused up a baton exchange in the men's four by one hundred in Athens, four years ago, I was able to murmur, in bitter fellow-feeling, "I did that, too"—not something that most of us can say to a pole-vaulter or a synchronized diver. The same thing happened with artistic gymnastics on the opening weekend, during the team qualifying rounds; as the Americans flipped and twisted on the central floor (whose surprising bounciness is apparent only when viewed from above), there was an empathetic moan to my left. One of the Italian girls, Francesca Benolli, was up on the balance beam, better known as the Official Olympic Human Life Metaphor. She was standing sideways on it, having a wobble. For a few seconds, she was no longer one of the master race from the Olympic Village, spotless in a silver leotard; she was all of us, gloved and scarved, flapping dumbly on our front paths on an icy morning.

Most people will stay home and watch the events on TV, having no other option, but be warned: what NBC chooses to broadcast is not the Olympic Games. They offer selected clips of selected American athletes, largely in major sports, sometimes hours after the event, whereas, if the bruised Olympic ideal still means anything, it means loosing yourself, for a couple of weeks, from the bonds of your immediate loyalties and tastes. It means watching live sports you didn't know you were interested in, played by countries you've never been to, at three o'clock in the morning—not just watching them, either, but getting into them, deluding yourself that you grasp the rules, offering the fruits of your instant expertise to anyone who will listen ("I think you'll find the second waza-ari counts as ippon"), and, most bewildering of all, losing your heart. If I didn't follow the horrors in Munich, in 1972, it wasn't just because I was too young to understand but because I was occupied with worshipping Lasse Virén, the bearded Finnish policeman who won both the five thousand and the ten thousand metres on the track.

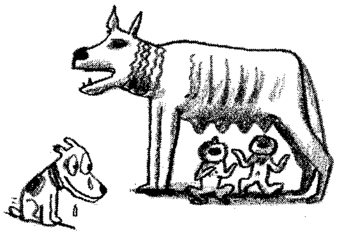
The habit has never left me. To witness four or five events, from ringside, should be sufficient for any sports freak, but, slumping back into my room after midnight, steaming from a walk through hot polluted rain, my soul aquiver with Korean archers and other triumphant minorities, I still found the will to switch on CCTV, the main state-run Chinese channel, and catch the bronze-medal fight in men's lightweight judo. It was a playoff, or heave-off, between Rasul Boqiev, of Tajikistan, and Dirk van Tichelt, of Belgium, and there was no doubt who would score ippon and thereby gain the prize. The Belgian seemed out of gas before he began, pink-browed and gulping for breath, unlike the sterling Boqiev, who looked as if he should be on horseback, surveying the steppe with a falcon on his wrist. At the instant of victory, he raised both hands wide in gratitude to his god, his thumbs strapped and—as is compulsory for judokas, according to "The Complete Book of the Olympics," by David Wallechinsky—his fingernails trimmed.

The newest edition of Wallechinsky's masterpiece, which he compiled with his nephew Jaime Loucky, may be the most entertaining book ever written. Where else can you read of Martinho de Araujo, the tragic weight lifter from East Timor, who, only eight years ago, having lost his training equipment in the war of independence, "was forced to create a makeshift bar by sticking a pole in buckets of wet cement"? As for Eva Klobukowska, the Polish sprinter who won two medals at Tokyo, in 1964, and became the first athlete to fail a sex test, I wouldn't have believed it were it not for the photograph supplied by Wallechinsky, which confirms that the lady in question resembled Harry Dean Stanton after an evening of rye and Lucky Strikes. Meanwhile, the ever-bristling issue of drugs is put into vivid perspective by Chris Finnegan, the Cassius Clay of Old England. In 1968, he won the middleweight title, fair and square, but failed miserably when it came to the provision of a urine sample. It wasn't that he wouldn't; he just couldn't. "Now, if there's one thing I've never been able to do, it's have a piss while someone's watching me," the eloquent bricklayer explained. "I can never stand at those long urinals you get in gents' bogs, with all the other blokes having a quick squint." Oh, for a new Finnegan, forty years on. It isn't the doping officials I would worry for; it's the Chinese interpreters.

Wallechinsky's guide was with me as I arrived for the water polo. Thanks to him, I was primed to note the fine distinctions between the three kinds of foul that can be committed in the course of a game; after a minute, I laid the book aside, having realized that all three were being committed all the time by everybody. The rules and infringements of this ancient sport are of a solemn complexity, but all are founded on the fundamental desire of one person to treat another as a tea bag. You find your opposite number, grab him (or her), and dunk, regardless of whether the ball is anywhere in the vicinity; neck-holding is especially popular, involving, as it does, much frantic splashing on the part of the drowner, and the whole exercise looks weirdly like a lifesaving class, except that the motive is reversed. The sport rode a big wave in 1924, when the American Olympic team in Paris included Johnny Weissmuller—presumably without his chimp, although with water polo it could be hard to tell.

I got to watch America versus China, an appetizer for the basketball encounter later in the day. (America won both.) The water polo took place at the Yingdong Natatorium, which cries out to be modified, once the Games are over, into a global forum for nonsense verse. How can you not love a sport in which, as a hooter signals the start of the game, the public-address system plays the theme from "Jaws," and the two central attackers sprint-crawl for the ball, which bobs gently in the center of the pool? The halftime entertainment was a moist echo of the opening ceremony: ten young Chinese women in wipe-clean dresses with transparent hems, whacking cylindrical drums filled with running water. It was chaos, in perfect harmony. Four older women had to bustle on afterward with buckets and mops to sponge up the mess. China, in its restless drive for invention, was busy creating needs, like drum-water clearance, that had never existed before, in the confidence that it would always have enough people to meet them. Lord knows what the later stages of the Games will bring, but rest assured: if there are flaming violinists, there will be dedicated musical firefighters standing by with a hose.

Are the Chinese right, however, to douse each conflagration? Olympic history is a merry mixture of sportsmanship and fracas, and the prevailing wish, among aficionados in Beijing, is that the remaining days should pass off peacefully, but not so peacefully that only the boxers get to throw a punch. Croatia and Serbia made a promising start at the Yingdong, with misconduct so unrelenting that three players and a coach were thrown out of the game—shades of Melbourne, in 1956, when the Hungarians, enraged by the Soviet invasion of their country, used water polo as the weapon it was always meant to be. "There was blood in the pool," Donald Hook, an Australian who was there, told me. On August 12th, I travelled in similar high hopes to the China Agriculture University Gymnasium, a pleasant spot, where the plan was that Lasha Gogitadze, of Georgia, should bump up against the Russian Nazyr Mankiev in Greco-Roman wrestling, thus prolonging, and perhaps inflaming, a situation that everyone else on the planet was trying to subdue. If all went well, they could aim to smash the record set in 1912, by Russia's Martin Klein and Finland's Alfred Asikainen, whose countries weren't at war but who nonetheless grappled manfully with each other for eleven hours. Regrettably, Gogitadze and Mankiev never came to blows, although I did see Roman Amoyan, a cuboid Armenian who had just won a bronze-medal bout, bellow his delight toward an Azerbaijani section of the crowd. That takes nerve.



And thus the attempt to keep politics out of sport, which is as futile as trying to keep the sweat out of sex, began to falter once more. Tempers began to splinter. On the evening of August 11th, a cream-colored armored car appeared outside the Main Press Center, half a mile from the National Stadium. In a far from plausible piece of window dressing, it was encircled by a red rope, like Angelina Jolie at a première, and its gun was sheathed in green wrapping. Was that a threat or a subtle joke, on the part of the Chinese military, about the muzzling of a free press? In the same way that President Bush was flummoxed by the buttocks of Misty May-Treanor, as proffered to him during a beach-volleyball match, so none of us knew how to treat the armored car. Should we slap it or tap it? In the event, we gave it a quick squint, as Chris Finnegan would say, and walked on by. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

UP NEXT

Going for gold in the bimonthly status meeting.

BY JOHN KENNEY

Graphic onscreen: Twenty-two minutes until John Kenney.

We see John Kenney in his office cubicle, listening to an iPod and looking really closely at the tip of a pencil.

AL TRAUTWIG: Twenty-two minutes now until we see John Kenney try to medal in the elusive sport of bimonthly-status-meeting commenting. First time for this event, and one that's unfamiliar to some of our viewers. Mary Carillo, you competed briefly in this event. What should we look for?

MARY CARILLO: Al, this is an event dominated by the Dutch, the Swiss, and, to a great extent, the North Koreans. These are active participants in bimonthly status meetings, people who really prepare, whereas Americans—new to the sport—tend to be far more lethargic, taking it more as a pastime than as something to really prepare for.

A.T.: John Kenney.

M.C.: Indeed. Kenney has a unique approach to the sport. He appears, at first, almost completely ignorant of what's happening in a meeting, often looking around with a puzzled expression.

A.T.: A cat-and-mouse game.

M.C.: No. He genuinely has no idea what's going on.

A.T.: How does he catch up?

M.C.: He might borrow the minutes of the last meeting from whomever he's sitting next to or even whisper to his neighbor, asking something like "What's happening? Who's this Phil guy?"

A.T.: He never attended college.

M.C.: No, not even close. And that's the remarkable thing. He's able to glom on to something someone said and repeat it as if it were his own thought.

A.T.: As only a true Olympian can. Mary Carillo spoke with the two women who spurred John Kenney on to meeting greatness.

A montage of photographs of John Kenney as a baby, a child, a teen-ager. In every one, he's sitting at a conference table. In one photo, age four, he appears to be pointing to a staffing chart. During this montage, we hear the voices of two women.

MOTHER: The first words out of his mouth—

SISTER: I'll never forget this—

MOTHER: His first words were "I'd like to speak to Ted's earlier point on the Q1 numbers."

We now see John's mother and his sister, speaking to Mary Carillo.

MOTHER: We knew he was special.

SISTER: And very different.

A montage of John and his mother and sister eating unusually large waffles, playing cards, and playing miniature golf. Throughout, we hear Mary Carillo.

M.C.: John never knew his father, an out-of-work freelance U-boat captain. His mother had to make ends meet on her salary as the senior vice-president of global marketing at Brown Brothers Harriman. But, always, John loved meetings. So much so that one Christmas he asked only for a conference table, easels, and an overhead projector.

MOTHER: We never even knew that meetings were an Olympic event. But that's when John met his social-studies teacher, Mr. Bluth.

A montage of photographs of young John with Howard Bluth.

BLUTH: He was just different from the other kids. And not just because he drooled a lot.

Howard Bluth being interviewed by Mary Carillo.

M.C.: What made him so different?

BLUTH: He was . . . weird. Odd. Quirky. A little annoying. Short. Very bad skin. No one liked him. Not even me. He was a horrible athlete, didn't say much. In twenty-five years of teaching, I'd never seen a student with less energy, interest, or charisma. It was almost like he was catatonic. But then, when called upon in class, he was able, at an early age, to take a fresh, cogent thought that a classmate had made moments before and restate it as if it were his own. I knew then that he had the raw skills to become a truly great middle-management-meeting Olympian.

A montage of John Kenney in meetings over the years: Now looking lethargic, now biting his nails, now staring out a window, now spilling coffee on himself, now laughing out of context at something he thought was funny in his head. Followed by a montage of comments he's made in meetings.

J.K.: Maybe let's regroup in two weeks?

J.K.: I'm not sure I understand what Alan means when he says "profit and loss." How can you have both?

J.K.: Larry's point is an important one. I'd just like to recap what he just said.

J.K.: How about a round of applause for Tina's thought about the outsourcing thing she was just talking about.

Back to Al and Mary.

A.T.: An amazing story, a bizarre sport.

M.C.: Like the trampoline, like beach volleyball, like archery in many ways, so few people understand why or how or even the point of bimonthly-status-meeting commenting. But herein lies the mystery—and the power—of this odd, odd sport.

A.T.: We take you now to the conference room, where the meeting is already in progress . . . .♦

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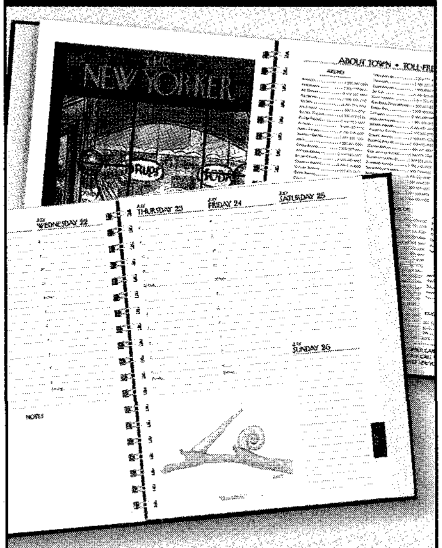

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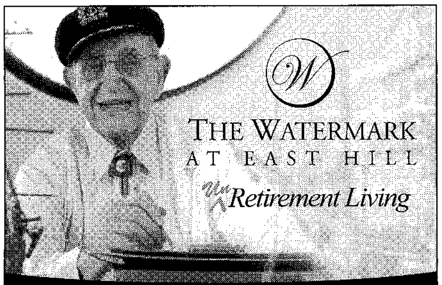

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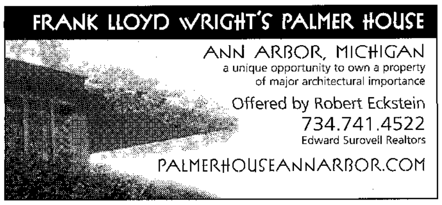

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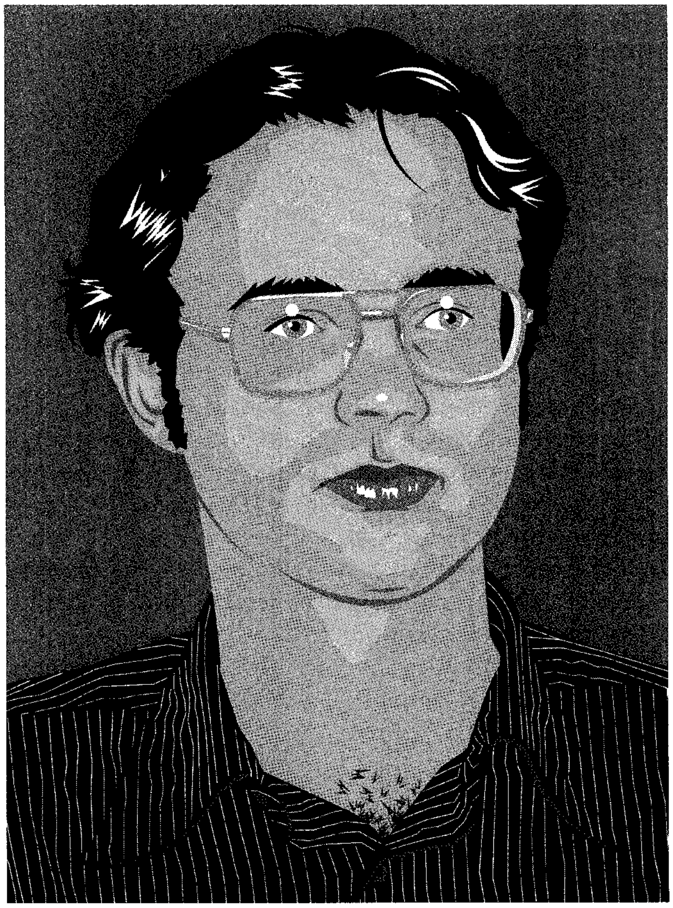
PERSONAL HISTORY

SONIC YOUTH

A composer finds his voice in San Francisco.

BY JOHN ADAMS



In 1972, several months after I completed one of my first musical compositions—"Heavy Metal," in which ambient sounds were melded, on magnetic tape, with the gurgling sequences of a primitive synthesizer—my new wife, Hawley, and I set off for California. At the time, aspiring composers typically pursued postgraduate study in Europe, learning the latest styles of twelve-tone music and soaking in the great traditions of the past. But the California that I'd been reading about in books by Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, and the beats appealed to my contrary state of mind. I was twenty-five and had spent my entire life in New England, growing up in East Concord, New Hampshire, and attending Harvard for six years. I was eager to strike out on my own. "Heavy Metal" had been a defiant farewell gesture of sorts; it probably owed more to Stockhausen and the Beatles' "A Day in the Life" than it did to Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

After an eight-day drive across the continent, Hawley and I took up residence in the Bay Area. San Francisco housing was too expensive, so, in exchange for a free apartment, I took the humiliating position of assistant manager of a building just off Berkeley's famously eccentric Telegraph Avenue. Outside on the narrow street, Cal students in slacks and windbreakers min-

Adams, perhaps best known for the operas "Nixon in China" and "Doctor Atomic," rebelled against his academic models, and sought a music of greater expressive power.

gled with aging hippies and street people muttering to themselves. Adolescent runaways with greasy hair lounged on the sidewalk, begging for spare change, stray mongrels at their side. Street venders sold hash pipes and Vietcong flags that smelled of verbena. For a buck, a street poet would improvise a verse for you. Ancient VW vans chugged and farted up the street, their doors and panels painted with Sanskrit phrases.

On occasion, I'd drive over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco and hang out in the cafés and bookstores in North Beach. Late one night, while sitting in a bar there, I saw Allen Ginsberg walk in. He was alone and appeared to be looking for someone, but he seemed good-natured enough for me to swallow my nervousness and go up to him and introduce myself. I asked him for William Burroughs's address; I wanted to send him a copy of "Heavy Metal," whose title was an homage to Uranian Willy, the Heavy Metal Kid—a character in Burroughs's novel "The Soft Machine." Ginsberg peered at me through thick eyeglasses, whipped out an old-fashioned fountain pen from a cloth book bag, tore a piece of paper from a notebook, and handed the pen and paper to me. He dictated Burroughs's address in London. "Send it to him," he said. "He's always interested." (I never did. When I attempted to make a copy for Burroughs, I discovered that my original tape had disintegrated in its box.)

My plan was to live as a proletarian worker by day and an avant-garde composer at night. I took a job on the Oakland waterfront, working for a dingy clothing-import business called Regal Apparel. My days were spent in a sprawling, drafty warehouse not far from the Bay Bridge. I was a "lumper"—a member of a team of men who climbed into the back of shipping containers that had been packed in Singapore or Seoul and unloaded them by hand. Each container held tons of "drygoods," usually cheap clothing. I personally handled most of the Bermuda shorts worn by Richard Nixon's Silent Majority during the summer of 1972.

I returned from my long workdays at Regal Apparel exhausted and in no mood to spend the evening composing. Hawley, a jazz violinist who had taken a job teaching yoga at an Oakland health club, often came home from work at nine o'clock to find me asleep on the sofa. I wrote no music for a year, and by midwinter I was falling into a depression. California was enchanting, but the prospect of surviving on a grinding minimum-wage job was enough to make me consider returning to graduate school. I ardently didn't want to become a university composer, but I felt caught in a crisis of my own making.

By the following spring, I was on the verge of returning to Boston and Harvard when a friend and fellow-composer, Ivan Tcherepnin, called me and said that the San Francisco Conservatory of Music was looking for someone to teach composing and to direct the school's series of new-music concerts. The two faculty members who had been organizing the concerts had recently resigned, and the school's president was desperate to fill the post. The day before, the rusted-out floor of my Volkswagen had collapsed on the Ashby Avenue freeway ramp as I was driving to the warehouse, and I had suddenly found my seat scraping along the pavement of Interstate 80 while I frantically headed for the shoulder. It seemed as emphatic a message as any that I needed a change. I took the job.

In those days, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music was based in a former home for unwed mothers in the Sunset district. In a city that was otherwise full of piquant character and stunning vistas, the Sunset district was oddly bland: one had to know it well to ferret out a decent ethnic restaurant or a bookstore. But the school was a place of pulsing, chaotic excitement. Students sporting wild hair and dressed in baggy jeans and sandals wandered through the hallways, and, every morning at 8 A.M., the practice rooms began emanating an Ivesian cacophony of pianos, trumpets, drums, double-basses, and singers.

I taught there for twelve years, from 1972 to 1984, by fits and starts finding my voice as a composer. The Conservatory was still struggling to establish itself, and few students were on a par with the typical Juilliard or Curtis performer. But there was a keen interest in all kinds of avant-garde music, something unimaginable at any of the East Coast colleges. I had students who could barely play their instruments but were nevertheless delighted to join me in a John Cage "event" or perform in one of Alvin Lucier's electro-acoustic "process" pieces.

One of my duties was directing the school's New Music Ensemble. This group, although made up of students, had for years given attention-getting concerts of avant-garde music at the de Young Museum, in Golden Gate Park. The works of Cage, Stockhausen, Boulez, Ligeti, and others were presented to enthusiastic audiences, and the concerts were covered by three of the local newspapers—again, something unthinkable in Boston.

My first concert signalled my ambition: Cage, Schoenberg, and Robert Ashley shared the program with the Messe de Nostre Dame by the fourteenth-century French composer Guillaume de Machaut. For the Machaut, a piece whose strangeness had stirred my imagination, I composed a "trope" of electronic taped music, with ring-modulated bell sounds, traffic noise, and footsteps, meant to provide a "continuum" to the live singing of the Mass (which I conducted from the stage). The San Francisco *Chronicle* critic who covered the concert said that my surround-sound update of Machaut's Mass was "about as entertaining as discovering 'Guillaume Was a Head' scratched on Rheims Cathedral." I decided to take this as a compliment.

Homemade "guerrilla" electronics were becoming hip among those of us who wanted to be avant-garde. Composers like Lucier, Ashley, Cage, and David Tudor were making radical compositions featuring contraptions of their own design and construction. In the predigital seventies, electronic music came either from the manipulation of tape recorders or from oscillators whose sensitivity to heat made them capricious. On a typical day, I'd spend the morning talking to a class of glazed-eyed graduate students about Beethoven's Opus 132 string quartet; the afternoon rehearsing the school orchestra in "Petrushka" or a Mozart symphony; and the evening huddled in my office with a soldering iron, my desktop covered with resistors, capacitors, wires, and circuit-board chips that I had scrounged at a flea market near the Oakland airport.

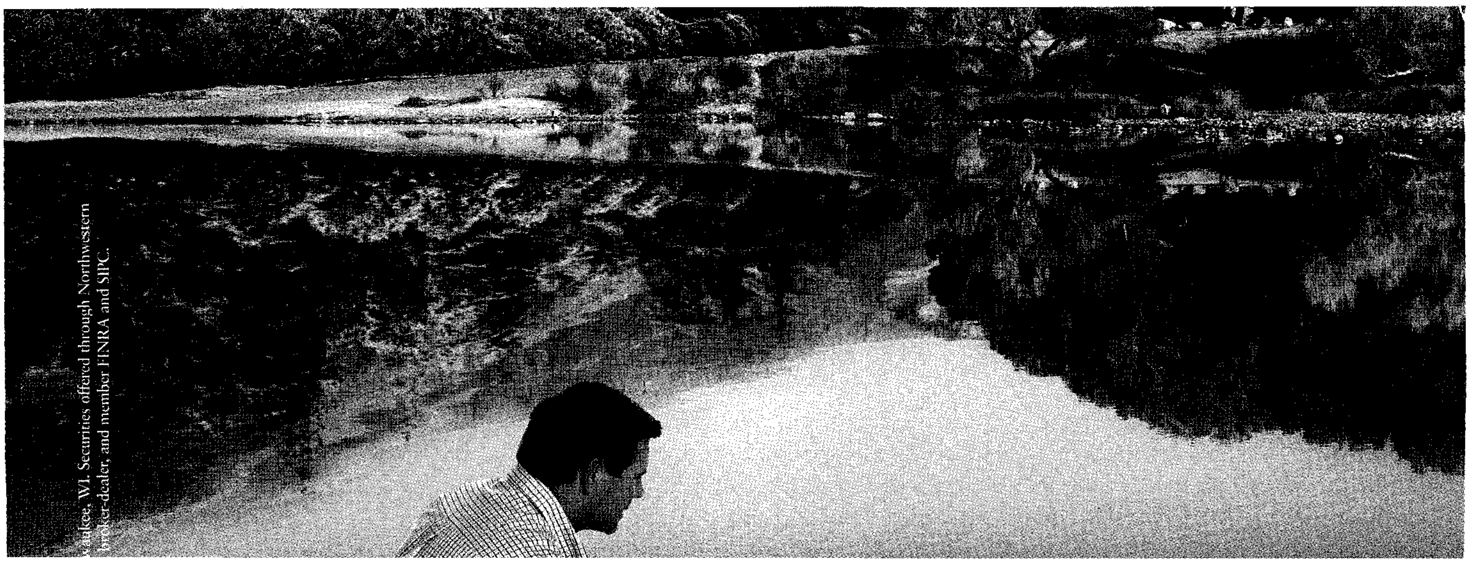
I eventually emerged with the Studebaker—a homemade modular synthesizer that featured a bank of intermittently truant oscillators, filters, ring modulators, and a primitive sampling

QUICKHONEY

device. Housed in a heavy redwood case, it was comically bulky. Even so, I composed several live electronic pieces for the Studebaker (named after a recalcitrant car that my family had owned during my childhood). With all guns firing, the Studebaker was capable of producing a commotion audible from a distance of several Zip Codes. Among the works I produced with it was a forty-minute "ritual" called "Grounding," which I first performed with my students at the Hall of Flowers, a dank exhibition space in Golden Gate Park. "Grounding" was very much a child of the times, being a loosely structured process piece, complete with wailing soprano saxophones (anchoring a movement called "Strident Bands") and a trio of aggressively amplified vocalists chanting fragments of Tantric poetry and excerpts from "Laws of Form," a book on symbolic logic, by G. Spencer-Brown. To all this, the Studebaker contributed a sonic retaining wall of snarling sawtooth waves that no doubt reamed out the inner ears of the sixty or seventy brave and foolish souls who paid five bucks to attend the event.

At another Hall of Flowers concert, I supervised a collaborative work called "Lo-Fi." The idea of this piece—suggested by a friend and fellow faculty member, Alden Jenks—was to make music from junk. Unlike the pretentious faux Buddhism of "Grounding," "Lo-Fi" was genuinely whimsical and charming, even if, like most avant-garde pieces of the time, it overstayed its welcome by an hour or so. In preparation, I had gone off with students to scavenge Salvation Army stores, antique shops, and used-audio suppliers in search of out-of-date objects that could still produce sound. We surrounded the audience in the cement-floored Hall of Flowers with naked speaker cones yanked from automobile dashboards; transistor panels, whose winking blue and red diodes dangled from the ceiling; a wind-up Victrola phonograph; and a phalanx of pots, pans, iron brake drums, saw blades, trash cans, and alarm bells, all connected through jury-rigged wires to flimsy amplifiers and loudspeakers. We piped scratchy 78-r.p.m. disks of Liberace, Frank Sinatra, and the Andrews Sisters through punishing electronic circuits that turned the hit-parade songs of an earlier era into a din of squeaks, scratches, chirrups, and assaultive feedback. The mischievous and rigorously absurd—or absurdly rigorous—spirit hovering over "Lo-Fi" was John Cage, a guru to those of us who thought of ourselves as experimental composers. After the concert, one of my more skeptical students drolly offered to give me composition lessons.

Another piece of mine, "American Standard"—named after a familiar domestic appliance—dismantled several classic homegrown musical forms. One of its movements, "John Philip Sousa," was obviously a march, but it was stripped down to a plodding pulse, with no melody or harmony. The result sounded like the retreat from battle of a badly wounded army (not my original intention, but cu-



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riously evocative all the same). Another movement, "Christian Zeal and Activity," was a deconstruction of a famous hymn. The soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices—which in the hymn move in rhythmic unison—drifted apart from one another, like slow bubbles rising in a dense liquid. My score invited the performers to add "extra-musical material," and, for the first performance, I taped a late-night AM radio talk show in which an abusive host argued about God with a patient man who eventually identified himself as a preacher. This is the version that appeared on my first commercial recording, which was released in 1975 on Brian Eno's appropriately named Obscure label.

Lacking a publisher, I had my ink autograph scores to "American Standard" and other pieces made into offset plates by a local printer, and I bound the large pages together with heavy electrician's tape. "American Standard" turned out to be a kind of bellwether piece, pointing the way toward later, more technically assured works—such as "Nixon in China," "Grand Pianola Music," and "Doctor Atomic"— that probed my sense of America's national identity.

My radical phase peaked, perhaps, on a morning in April, 1974, when I arrived at my local bank, three blocks from the Conservatory, to cash a ten-dollar check. The bank had just announced a change in its hours, and I couldn't recall whether the new opening time was nine-thirty or ten, so I arrived shortly before ten o'clock. Outside, I discovered a gathering crowd of neighbors, and I watched while police and paramedics loaded someone onto a stretcher and drove off in an ambulance. In a neighborhood as becalmed as the Sunset, a bank robbery was the last thing to expect. But this was no ordinary heist. The bank had just been hit by the Symbionese Liberation Army, and among the robbers was the twenty-year-old publishing heiress Patty Hearst. Had I arrived a few minutes earlier, I might well have been staring straight down the barrel of "Tania" 's submachine gun.

Around this time, my marriage to Hawley went into a tailspin. Increasingly exasperated by the endless hours I spent shut off in a room with my manuscripts, charts, and diagrams, she decided to go it alone and moved in with a group of jazz musicians on the other side of the city. What little we owned was divided up, and I soon found myself renting space in a garage, my bed only three feet from the landlady's Buick. Consumed by morbid self-pity, I survived on boiled eggs and ramen for half a year, reading Zen stories and studying electronic circuits. Finally, I moved into a splendid little cottage, a block from Golden Gate Park and two blocks from the ocean. From my bedroom, I could hear the breakers hitting the seawall and smell the brackish morning air. Things began to look up.

I made avant-garde music in every imaginable location in the city: in underground culverts, in an arboretum in Golden Gate Park, in vacant storefronts and bookstore lofts, even in a converted Masonic temple. I lugged my ridiculous Studebaker from one event to another. I composed a piece called "Triggering," in which, at a converted warehouse on Mission Street, I followed improvising dancers around the floor with a long-distance shotgun microphone. Each time a dancer hit the floor, or even grunted from exertion, my microphone picked up the sound and caused circuits on my synthesizer to fire, emitting a loud noise. These I mixed with audio "found objects" I had recorded on tape cassettes—chirping insects, clanging streetcars, humming ocean vessels. I vividly recall standing patiently in Golden Gate Park with my microphone, poised over a pile of dog poop, and recording the buzz of several blissed-out flies.

I started hanging out with half a dozen performance artists, filmmakers, and students from Mills College, in Oakland, who had moved into an abandoned flophouse, the Reno Hotel, in the derelict area of San Francisco known as South of Market. This was the same depressed part of town where Jack Kerouac weathered his crushing alcoholic benders. The Reno, on a narrow side alley called Harriet Street, had been condemned several years earlier and was awaiting the final stroke of the wrecking ball. But demolition had been mysteriously halted, leaving half the structure standing and the other half a lethal pile of bombed-out debris—smashed beams, broken glass, rusted nails, and live electrical conduits. Into this toxic shell of a building, bristling with any number of possibilities for serious bodily injury, came a bunch of artist squatters. One of them, Virginia Quesada, a graduate-student filmmaker at Mills, organized "A Night at the Reno Hotel," an avant-garde extravaganza unlike anything that even John Cage could have imagined. She invited electronic-music composers, conceptualists, video artists, monologists, painters, and various unclassifiable types to occupy rooms in the Reno and "do art" there. On a Saturday night in February, 1976, hundreds of people flooded the hallways of the hotel, drinking, partying, and checking out the various events. Many of the rooms upstairs had no electricity, nor was there a functioning stairway. Attendees had to climb up a ladder, through treacherous darkness, to get upstairs. Fancying myself an expert in these matters, I had threaded industrial-grade conduit along the dark, vermin-filled hallways to provide power to the rooms. Amazingly, the police were never alerted, and my hazardous, untutored electrician's work did not create a short circuit and cause what would have been a catastrophic fire. We were lucky: the Reno Hotel could have easily become the Coconut Grove of the avant-garde.

Life in San Francisco suited me, but I began to grow restless with the concerts I was putting on. Most were played to tiny audiences consisting largely of other aspiring composers. Boredom was not just an ancillary feature of these concerts; it was more often than not the main event, a provocation that each audience member had to come to grips with. I, too, pushed the boredom envelope, especially in a composition for chorus called "Ktaadn." This piece was founded on the chance principles of John Cage, and was inspired by Henry David Thoreau's description of climbing Mt. Katahdin, in Maine. I obtained a map of the area and, with a compass, drew around the summit of the mountain a circle with a radius of fifty miles. This, I estimated, was the view that Thoreau described. I then made a list of all the local Abenaki place names—Millinocket, Ambajejus, Mattawamkeag—and set these words to short, modal melodies. Finally, I invited the members of the chorus to make their own individual sequences of these melodies. For an indeterminate time, the chorus sang the names, accompanied only by the mewling of my electronic drones in the background. The result was a congenial but resolutely uneventful chaos of communal mumbling. I was hard put not to acknowledge the tedium that set in at about the fifth minute—once the audience realized that things were unlikely to change.

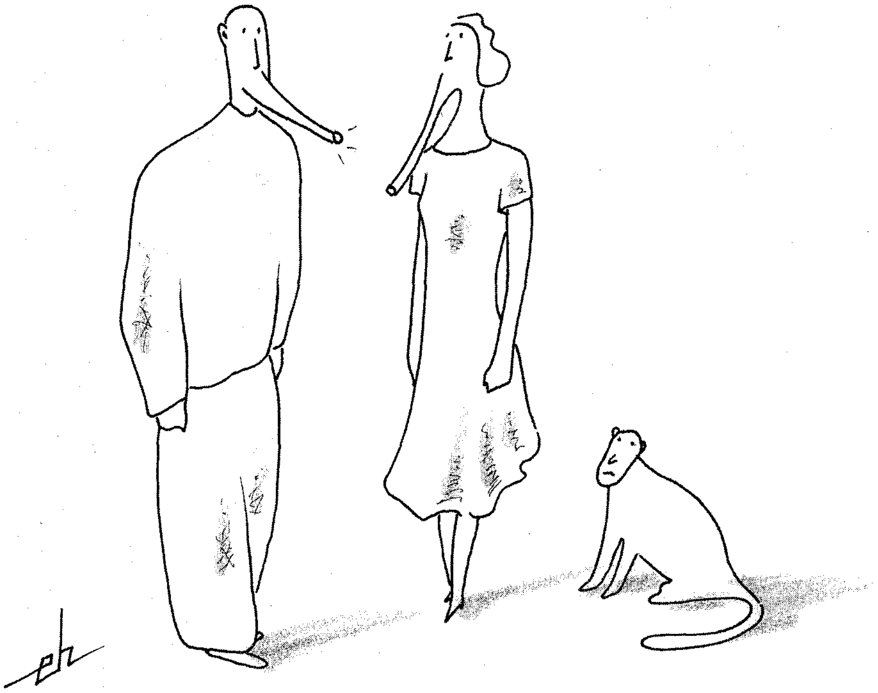
I remember such apprentice pieces fondly. They were genuine attempts to fit my emerging sensibility into what I perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be the governing aesthetic philosophy of the time. They employed chance procedures, but not with the Zen rigor that Cage practiced. They eschewed virtuosity: pieces like "Ktaadn" could be performed by the most modest of amateurs. Most of all, they avoided being earnest. I took Cage seriously in his admonishment to keep the ego out of the music.

Nevertheless, I was becoming increasingly alienated from the postures of the avant-garde. Boredom has its uses in a work of art: it can lend ballast to long, evolving structures and help to highlight a moment that might otherwise get lost. But the avant-garde—especially the musical version of it—had elevated tedium into a fundamental aesthetic principle. Composers avoided teleological forms like the plague. A musical form was "teleological" if it followed a purposeful development toward an end. Cage advocated an open acceptance of "no matter what eventuality," and, in order to take the "ego" and "taste" out of the creative act, he devised procedures such as tossing coins or using maps of stellar constellations to derive pitches, dynamics, and durations. Such gestures inspired in listeners a sort of analytical excitement, but without the benevolent presence of Cage himself the result of these chance operations was too often emotionally cold and expressively indifferent music. I didn't see much distinction between a work created, American style, by tossing coins and one created, Euro style, by transposing serial sets of pitches.

Despite my confusion and dissatisfaction during this period, I never doubted that I wanted to become a composer. I simply had not found the right mode of self-expression.

One day in 1976, the pianist Mack McCray, a close friend, proposed that I write a big solo piece for him—something virtuosic that would take advantage of his powerful hands, which had a subtle control of sonic colors. Mack had introduced me to the great keyboard works of Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms, and it seemed only right to create something that complemented his abilities. To compose the piece, I moved a battered spinet piano into my tiny cottage near the beach. The room where I worked was so small that even that spinet sounded thunderous, and I banged away at it for months, testing out ideas for the music.

The piece, "Phrygian Gates," turned out to be a behemoth, a trial of endurance and difficulty for even the best pi-



"Before the Internet, I just assumed I was the only one, and kept more or less to myself."

anists. Lasting twenty-four minutes, it was a non-stop tour of the piano keys—or, rather, half of them—that kept the pianist going at maximum concentration. I imagined each hand of the performer as its own "wavemaker," independent of the other. The "waves" were actually repeated patterns that slowly changed shape as the music moved along. Cagean principles of indeterminacy took no part in this piece. On the contrary, it was built on a precise formal and expressive plan.

"Phrygian Gates" was a hit with audiences, especially when McCray played it. Listeners were entranced by his big body hovering over the keyboard, and by his bear-paw hands, which could deliver both hammerlike blows and the most delicate caresses. After years of testing listeners' patience with chance-based music, I felt a new, visceral sense of engagement from the audience.

The piece also demonstrated the fruits of my initiation into Minimalism. I had heard a recording of "In C," Terry Riley's epochal work, while still living in Cambridge. "In C" was to contemporary American music what Ginsberg's "Howl" or Kerouac's "On the Road" had been to literature. With its insistent, unyielding pulse on the high C of a piano, and the sunny, upbeat fragments of melodies circulating over and over in a loose polyphony, "In C" captured the congenial hippie spirit of the West Coast while at the same time proposing a new, slowly evolving approach to musical form. It was also marvellously provocative—an R. Crumb-style middle finger to the crabbed, pedantic world of academic modernism.

In San Francisco, I heard a more elegant version of the Minimalist aesthetic when Steve Reich brought his ensemble to the city, in 1974, to perform his work "Drumming." Next to "In C," Reich's materials were more fastidiously organized, and the evolution of melodic, harmonic, and timbral elements was more methodical. In contrast to the anarchic "happenings" I'd been creating with my students and friends, Reich's music used precision and balanced counterpoint to create a sound world that was expertly controlled, musically engaging, and sensually appealing.

The Minimalism of Riley, Reich, and Philip Glass—whose "Einstein on the Beach" I heard selections from when Glass performed in San Francisco with his group—offered a way out of the cul-de-sac in which I seemed to be stuck. I had grown up listening to jazz, and later found myself surrounded by the insistent rhythms and simple harmonic language of rock. That music felt like my own genome, and, above all, I wanted to intone those roots musically, just as American writers like Whitman, Williams, Kerouac, and Ginsberg had found poetry in the speech of the common person. The early works of Minimalism, radical as they were, did not obliterate the fundamental elements of musical discourse. Indeed, they embraced pulsation and repetition with an almost childlike glee. To me, it felt as if the pleasure principle had been invited back into the listening experience.

The amassing of large, expressive structures through the repetition of small elements was the essential technique of Minimalism. Several years earlier, however, on a trip to Florence, I'd had a memorable initiation into a much older use of that technique. I'd gone there as a coach for a summer music program for American teen-agers, and found myself overcome with sensory excitement. The Italian Renaissance architects built large buildings, public and private, by repeating small motifs, whether in stone, marble, glass, or ceramics. I contemplated their perfect geometries in the warm summer light. Upon returning to San Francisco, I was determined to find a way to express in musical terms that same combination of order and sensuality. Minimalist procedures pointed to a way, but I also recognized that, as a governing aesthetic, Minimalism would rapidly exhaust itself. Like Cubism in painting, it was a radical idea, but its reductive world view would soon leave its practitioners caught in an expressive bind. Picasso saw the pregnant possibility of Cubism, but he also realized that it must eventually be absorbed into a larger, more embracing language. Achieving that integration became my overriding goal as a composer.

In 1975, a composer friend, Ingram Marshall, bought a small cabin in the high Sierras, some forty miles north of the town of Truckee, not far from the Nevada border. I began spending whatever free time I had in the area, and, with the help of another friend, I was able to co-own a cabin near Ingram's place. Ingram was a good companion in many ways. He had spent formative time in many places I had never visited: Bali; Scandinavia; SoHo, in New York City; and California Institute of the Arts, outside Los Angeles. He shared my interest in electronic music and Minimalism, but he also loved Bruckner, Sibelius, Strauss, and Mahler—late-Romantic composers whose work had little traction in the contemporary music world.

The Sierras' dense fir forests and craggy granite crests hiding jewel-like alpine lakes reminded me of the New Hampshire of my childhood. The route to the cabin starts in San Francisco, crosses the Bay Bridge, follows Interstate 80 into the Central Valley, past Sacramento, and begins climbing into the foothills near Sri Moonshine Ranch, Terry Riley's property. From here, the route ascends ever higher, into the country where "gold fever" spread in the eighteen-fifties, and it ends sixty-five hundred feet above sea level, on a dirt road deep in the Tahoe National Forest. In summer, the air is clear and brilliant, warm and dry. Trails wind along mountain ridges with vistas of the valley to the west, the hardpan terrain of Nevada to the east. At or near the cabin, I have seen bears, spotted owls, mule deer, giant porcupines, and once—in a remote turn of a high mountain trail—a large mountain lion, sitting in perfect stillness, her glassy eyes focussed directly on me.

On an early evening in the spring of 1976, I had a revelation while driving along a ridge in the Sierras, in my old Karmann Ghia convertible. At the time, I listened to music on a bulky portable Sony cassette deck the size of a small satchel, with a built-in speaker and a carrying strap. The ever-increasing piles of plastic cassette cases contained my current musical interests, everything from Monteverdi's Vespers to Miles Davis's "Bitches Brew." That evening, the Sony was playing a recording of music from Wagner's "Götterdämmerung." As I guided the car along the sharp curves and looked out on mist lingering below in narrow ravines and riverbeds, I listened intently to the shapely ascents and descents of Wagner's melodies and to the rich, morphing harmonic world that they described. Wagner had not been on my mind much in those days. But this music, especially the quiet opening bars of "Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey"—with its graceful leaps of sixths and sevenths, its soft cushions of string chords—spoke to me. I said out loud, almost without thinking, "He cares."

What Wagner cared about was making the intensity of his emotions palpable to the listener. His harmonies, restless and forever migrating toward a new tonal center, moved between tension and resolution in an uncanny way that constantly propelled the listener forward. The melodic leaps, always singable, gave shape and direction to the churning harmonic movement beneath. This was not just music about desire. It was desire itself, and the emotional and sensual power it possessed was inescapable. Wagner's music was grounded in enormous technical and intellectual sophistication, but its overriding effect was something that, I realized, had been absent from my avant-garde experiments: a sense of ravishment.

Not long after my revelation in the Karmann Ghia, a young Dutch conductor, Edo de Waart, then relatively unknown, was named music director of the San Francisco Symphony. He presented a stark contrast to his predecessor, the glamorous Seiji Ozawa. De Waart cared little for his appearance onstage, preferring to focus on the quality of the sound and the excellence of individual players. His performances of Mahler and Bruckner were deeply affecting. He got to the emotional core of the music not through intellectual forethought but, rather, through pure intuition. I began to go to orchestra concerts regularly, something I hadn't done in a while. We became friends, and he hired me to help him in an area where he had little expertise—contemporary music.

De Waart was the first conductor to recognize my potential as an orchestra composer. One day, he posed a risky challenge: he asked me to compose a large-scale piece for chorus and orchestra that would première in the inaugural season of the orchestra's new home, the Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall, scheduled to open in the fall of 1980.

Up to this point, I was known only as an avant-garde composer with a penchant for arousing the ire of local music critics. Suddenly, I had a major commission from an establishment arts organization. This was daunting enough, but de Waart also wanted a "choral symphony," something not even remotely in my repertoire. Now living in a house in Haight-Ashbury, where I had crammed my piano into a room slightly larger than a closet, I puzzled over how I might put my newly discovered musical language to use for such grand forces, and how I would fill a hall of nearly three thousand seats with sound. My music had been almost entirely chamber music or electronic pieces. I could make as imposing a sound as anyone with the help of loudspeakers, but now I would have to summon a full panoply of orchestral and choral texture without resorting to synthesizers and electronics.

At first, I thought I'd get around the issue simply by using the choral voices as if they were sound generators, like the oscillators in my homemade synthesizer. I would have the chorus sing only sustained vowel sounds. This idea turned out to be stillborn, so I began a search for a text. I went through a lot of poetry, looking not only for strong words but also for a theme that would bind the poetry into a meaningful whole. I initially went to Wallace Stevens, thinking that I might share both his New England sensibilities and a common philosophical outlook. He'd published some of his first poems under the title "Harmonium," a word that clearly resonated with my own concerns. In the end, the word "Harmonium" was all I drew from Stevens. I loved his poetry, but it didn't fit my musical needs.

Then I stumbled across a poem by John Donne called "Negative Love." The poem was a trope on negatives, a way of saying something ultimately positive by means of a curious kind of conceptual inversion. I saw in Donne's verse the image of a soaring arrow—a vector pointing upward, its ascent impelled by ever-increasing rhythmic and sonic energy. "Negative Love" immediately suggested a musical form to me. Once

I had that image, ideas flowed freely.

Starting with a pulsing D-natural, the chorus—reiterating the syllable "No" over and over—builds incrementally, accompanied by gently rippling figurations in the winds and, later, the strings. The music swells to the first of several expressive peaks with the words "fuell to their fire," and, after a sudden harmonic shift to E-flat major, begins ascending a long ramp, up to a pounding climax that exploits the full power of the combined orchestra and chorus.

How to follow a labyrinthine, philosophically allusive text like Donne's without veering toward the precious? I have by now forgotten exactly why I chose Emily Dickinson for the remainder of "Harmonium," but the juxtaposition offered a satisfying jolt. What drew me to her poetry was her gift for expressing thoughts of great subtlety in simple, direct language—a peculiarly American trait and the opposite of Donne's dense wordplay.

I began with a setting of "Because I could not stop for Death," which reminded me of my childhood in East Concord. The narrator's voice comes to us from beyond the grave, giving us a gently elegiac panorama of what she sees from a horse-drawn hearse as it passes through the familiar places in the small town where she lived. In East Concord, there was a cemetery only a few minutes' walk from my front door, and many of the graves dated from the time when Emily Dickinson lived. I treated the poem as if the images—the dignified grace of the horses, the school where children played, the fields of grain, the setting sun—were parts of a slow-motion film montage. There is pulse to the music, but it is barely ticking. The restless energy of Donne's "Negative Love" has wound down almost to a standstill.

Then comes the awakening of a new motion and energy. Perhaps I was unconsciously channelling that moment of discovery in the Sierras; I cannot be sure. The orchestra, heaving and surging from its very depths, begins a long, sustained crescendo that turns into a frenetic stampede, hurtling headlong out of the darkness. To the accompaniment of a monster orchestral gamelan, the chorus shouts a second Emily Dickinson poem, "Wild Nights." At a climactic point, I launched a mass accelerando. The chorus sings "Were I with thee / Wild Nights should be / Our luxury" over and over as the conductor drives the pulse ever faster, forcing it to the brink of chaos. At this point, the entire ensemble—some two hundred and twenty performers in the world première—comes together for two gigantic, spasmodic swells, only to leave the chorus hanging, pianissimo, over empty space.

The première of "Harmonium," on April 15, 1981, at Davies Hall, took almost everyone, including its composer, by surprise. The choral writing was full of unreasonable difficulties, the result of my inexperience in composing for voices. The San Francisco Symphony Chorus labored to follow my hand-autographed parts, struggling to cope with acres of seemingly identical repeating bars, counting and looking anxiously for cues and generally holding on for dear life. But the performance was electrifying, and the tsunamis of massed voices and orchestra elicited a palpable thrill among the audience. Seated in a box behind the first violins, I was in the first line of undiminished fortissimos, and by the end of "Wild Nights" I realized that I'd stopped breathing.

The audience greeted "Harmonium" with more than the customary polite applause for a new work—the sound of thousands of people clapping, and even cheering, when I appeared onstage seemed to indicate not only respect but pleasure. A tape of this first performance of "Harmonium" began making the rounds, not only locally but even as far away as Europe. Composers and conductors visiting San Francisco began calling, asking to listen to the piece. Undaunted by its difficulties, choruses and orchestras began performing it, in Cologne, St. Louis, Chicago, London, and even at Carnegie Hall. De Waart and his forces eventually made an impassioned recording, for ECM Records. On the album's back cover is a photograph of the young composer, shoeless and in jeans, sitting with his dog on a sofa in his Haight-Ashbury apartment. Through the window behind him, Victorian rooftops are just barely discernible in the late-afternoon fog. ♦

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An audio interview with John Adams.

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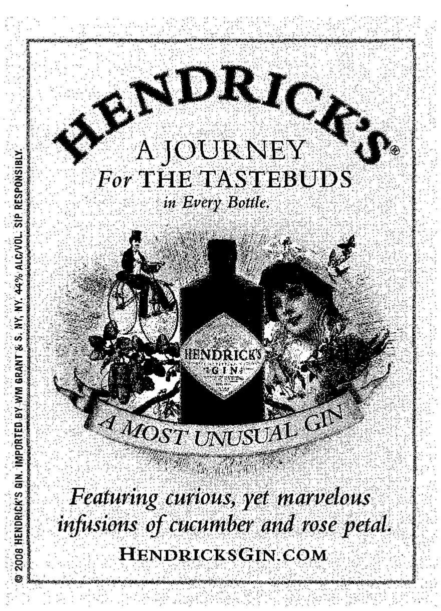
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LETTER FROM RANGOON

DROWNING

Can the Burmese people rescue themselves?

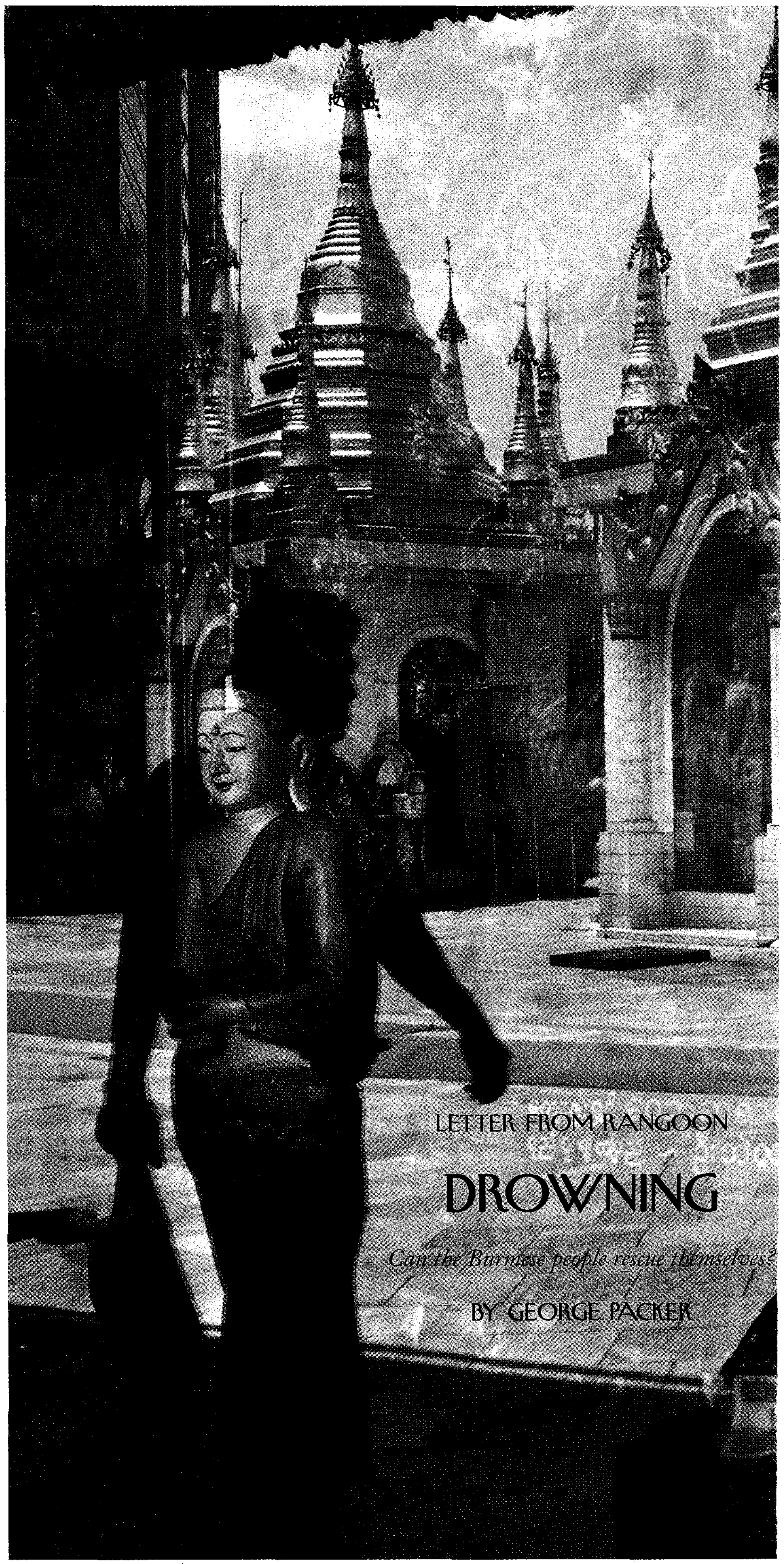
BY GEORGE PACKER

When night falls in Rangoon, the city's spectacular decay—patches of black mold devouring the yellowed walls of colonial buildings, trees growing wildly into crumbling third-story terraces—nearly disappears from view. The tea shops fill up, locals crowd the bookstalls on Pansodan Road, and the city, which seems furtive and depressed by day, becomes a communal stage. In the Chinatown district, two men in an alley crank out schoolbooks with a hand-operated printing press. At a sidewalk fish market, women sell shrimp, scallops, and squid by candlelight, while two teen-agers nearby strum guitars. Further east, along the Rangoon River, in the old residential quarter of Pazundaung, the wooden houses are open to the street, like storefronts, revealing an old woman sitting on a couch, a living-room shrine strewn with votive candles, and two men laughing as they listen to a radio.

One such evening in June, I had dinner at an outdoor restaurant north of downtown with a young man I'll call Myat Min. He grew up in a working-class township on the outskirts of Rangoon, the son of a mechanic and a woman who sold spices from Thailand. His father had been trained by British Air Force officers, and in the years after the 1962 coup, which gave control of the country to the Burmese military, he kept the family radio tuned to the BBC. Each evening, he ate fried noodles, listened to the news in English, and cursed the dictatorship.

Over the decades, the Burmese government has subjected its citizens to epic misrule, systematically destroying every institution of society except the Army, whose leaders have made staying in power their overriding goal. The streets of Rangoon and Mandalay are monitored by the secret police and by a group of armed thugs known as Swan Arr Shin—the Masters of Force. Dissidents are routinely tortured. The generals' irrational economic policies have reduced one of Asia's richest countries, once the world's leading exporter of rice, to penury. Burma's gross domestic product per capita is now less than half that of its neighbor Cambodia. Economic sanctions—a form of protest against the government's human-rights abuses—have made the country even poorer.

Myat Min was not quite thirty when we met, with a dark, high-cheekboned



Soldiers about to close off access to Rangoon's Sule Pagoda, during the protests of Septembe

REPORTAGE BY GETTY IMAGES

007. Increasingly, dissidents are questioning the utility of direct confrontation with the government. Photograph by Christian Holst.

face, but he had the manner of a much older, eccentric man who had seen too much of life and was too vital to be self-effacing, even if his repressive society demanded it. He had an unusually loud voice by Burmese standards, which drew looks in public, and a laugh that often couldn't stop. The American expatriates in Rangoon called him Mr. Intensity. He wore only *longyis*, the Burmese sarong; he didn't own any pants. "I hate modern life," he said.

In 1995, when he was sixteen, Myat Min noticed a collection of stories by W. Somerset Maugham in a bookstall on Pansodan Road. He rented it (few Burmese can afford to buy books) and read the stories with such strong identification that he began calling himself Somerset. He moved on to Dickens, learning not just to read English but to speak it, sometimes with oddly Victorian cadences. I asked him why these British writers appealed to him. "All of the characters are me," he said, with a boisterous laugh. "Neither a British nor an American young man living in the twenty-first century can understand a Dickens as well as I can! I am living in a Dickensian atmosphere. Our country is at least one or two centuries behind the Western world. My neighborhood—bleak, poor, with small domestic industries, children playing in the street, parents fighting with each other, some with great debt, everyone dirty—that is Dickens. I am more equipped to understand Dickens than modern novels. I don't know what is air-conditioning, what is subway, what is fingerprint exam."

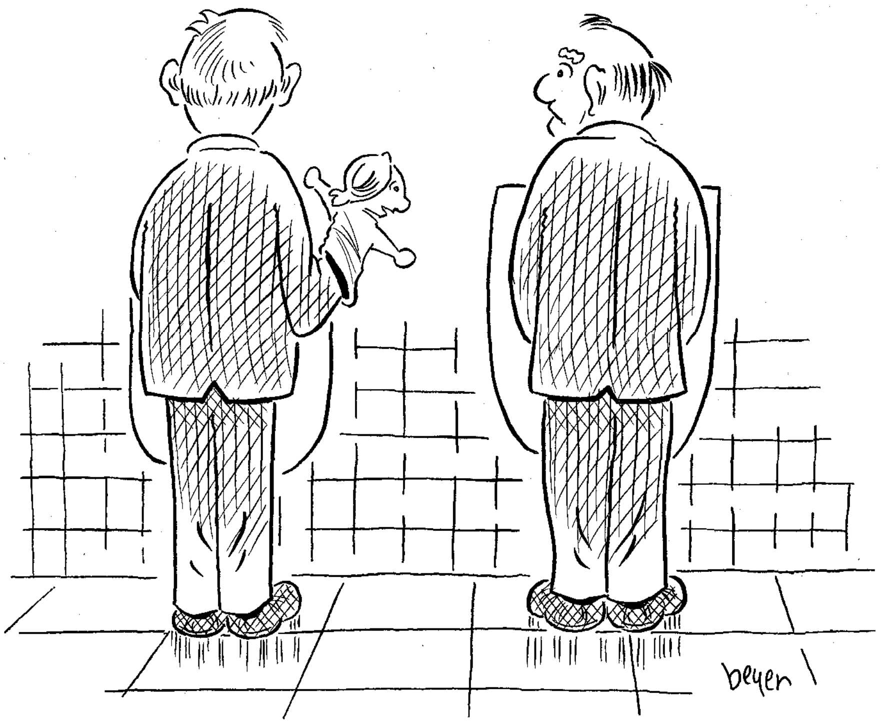
In 1988, when Myat Min was ten, Rangoon and other Burmese cities filled with millions of demonstrators calling for an end to military rule. It was a revolutionary moment, and by far the most serious challenge to the reign of the generals; the protest led by monks last September is the only event that comes close. Myat Min's older brothers disappeared from home for several months to join the uprising, and his father went looking for them every day. At the height of the demonstrations, Myat Min sneaked out of his house. He saw a mob of people, some of whom were carrying spikes on which the severed heads of informers—burned charcoal black—had been impaled. "Democracy!" the people shouted.

"I became interested in politics because of those scenes," Myat Min told me. At home, his father said, "Aung San Suu Kyi is the new leader of our country. American troops will come liberate us." But Suu Kyi—the daughter of the general who led Burma to independence, in 1948, and who became an accidental heroine to the protesters in 1988—was soon placed under house arrest, on the shore of Inya Lake, in the middle of the city. She has for the most part remained there ever since, in an isolation as profound as her country's.

Myat Min decided to pursue his passion for English literature at Rangoon University; he dreamed of a life immersed in ideas, "like walking through the forest in the dead of night." But by 1996, the year he enrolled, the university had almost ceased to exist. To prevent students from gathering in protest, the government repeatedly closed the main campus and began busing undergraduates to makeshift campuses outside the capital. The semester dwindled to ten days in the classroom, with assignments and exams handled through the mail. In order to maintain the illusion of a successful system, the government continued to pass large numbers of students, even though their base of knowledge was shrinking precipitately. Higher education in Burma, once the training ground of a skilled civil service, was destroyed.

Myat Min found himself at a miserable campus in the satellite township of Dagon. "I met no like-minded students and teachers," he said. "I wanted a library with good books—there was none." A few months into his first year, after more anti-government protests, the university was closed indefinitely. In August, 1998, the government suddenly announced that students would sit for exams in the very classes that had been terminated two years earlier. Students began to demonstrate, but this time their initial demands were modest, with slogans like "Postpone exams" and "Provide distance students with hostels."

Myat Min decided to protest his farcical education. "No student at exams was as furious as I was," he said. "I was angry at everyone. I would kick a dog, even." He brought the autobiography of Thomas Jefferson to class, hoping to be punished. "But the teachers were O.K. with it," he said. "I was very angry with that O.K." In his Burmese-literature class, he didn't bother reading the professor's exam questions, and wrote an anti-government essay instead. Still, nothing happened. The next day, he sat down in English class and ripped his exam book to pieces. Everyone in the room was terrified. A teacher approached his chair, told Myat Min that he had to complete the test, and gave him a new exam book. He tore it up as well. Then he wrote on the shredded paper, in English, "Down with the regime" and "I'm a nonconformist." Only fifteen min-



"Word around the office is that I give everyone the creeps."

utes had gone by, but Myat Min had nothing more to say. He left the classroom and went out into the street, where he started distributing anti-government pamphlets. Two weeks later, military-intelligence officers came to his house.

During his interrogation, Myat Min was kicked and beaten. He was sent to Burma's most notorious prison, Insein, north of Rangoon, near the airport. He showed me a short account he later wrote of the months before his "trial": "Sometimes I ate cooked rice with a strong bad smell, and the curry was a blend of green roots, a spoonful of saffron powder, and a good amount of water. After two or three months of living on such food, my tongue and stomach started wriggling in a search for their usual stimuli, so much so that I sometimes felt like chewing my own thigh."

In January, 1999, Myat Min and several friends were tried and sentenced en masse by a judge who refused to allow any of them to speak. Myat Min received twenty-one years—seven for illegal printing, seven for distributing the pamphlets, and seven for anti-government activities. He was twenty years old.

In Burma's military-intelligence lockups, political detainees are given repeated beatings, placed in stress positions, and made to stand in water for days on end. In Insein, the torture takes a different form: extreme isolation, no sunlight, inedible food, no writing materials. (I was told that a political prisoner found with a pen was punished more severely than a prisoner hiding a knife.) When Myat Min was there, prisoners had to wear cotton hoods with cutout eyeholes any time they left their cell, in order to prevent communication between inmates. A friend of Myat Min's was caught trying to teach himself Chinese characters by writing on a piece of plastic with a nail; his ankles were shackled together for two weeks.

Reading was banned at Insein until 1999, when the International Committee of the Red Cross was allowed to make prison visits. After that, the regime gave inmates access to Buddhist writings, then to government newspapers, Burmese magazines, and, finally, English books. In the early years, Myat Min used a piece of red brick to write the names of novels and novelists on his cell floor. With a nail or shard of iron, he inscribed on plastic bags stories that he remembered, including dialogue, and passed them to his friends, who read the texts against the light. He retold the story of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, whom he had read about in *Time* and found fascinating because of his hatred of modernity. After government newspapers were permitted, he followed the *New Light of Myanmar's* critical coverage of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, in 2003. Reading between the lines, he predicted, to his own delight, the rapid fall of Saddam's regime, charting the Americans' progress with elaborate maps.

Myat Min was freed from prison on July 6, 2005. He spoke of his seven years in a cell with unsettling equanimity. "The years I spent in prison were, by far, the most efficient and productive time of my life," he said. "Outside, we waste so many hours, so many days, yet we are not satisfied with how we spend our time. In prison, I feel I have complete control of my life."

On a quiet street near downtown Rangoon, in a neighborhood of elegantly faded colonial buildings, is a gated compound that is known as the American Center—a cultural outpost of the State Department. The James Baldwin Library and the Ella Fitzgerald Auditorium are open to any Burmese citizen willing to brave the police spies who haunt the area. Across the street, a security camera on the wall of a school is pointed at the center's front gate. No one seems to know if it actually works.

When I visited the Baldwin Library, which has twenty-two thousand members and thirteen thousand volumes, young Burmese were sitting on every available piece of furniture. For all their isolation and lack of analytical training, the citizens of Burma are stupendous readers. The bulletin board at the American Center library was covered with notes requesting books: biographies of Churchill, Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale," Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine." One note said, "Thank you very much for new books of Berryman, Papa, and Donald Hall. I'd like to request more books of Samuel Beckett and Hermann Hesse."

Three years ago, a thirty-six-year-old American named Thomas Pierce arrived in Rangoon to take charge of the American Center. Working with another official, Kim Penland, Pierce bought thousands of new books, tripled library membership, and started an English class for monks, a political-discussion class, a training workshop for journalists, and a literature book club. Another group composed a Burmese Wikipedia entry about the country. A debate club attracted surprisingly animated audiences for subversive propositions like "Democracy is the best form of government."

The American Center brought together Burmese of different ages and backgrounds in a way that levelled their society's normally rigid hierarchies. Former political prisoners from the 1988 demonstrations—the '88 Generation—discussed Machiavelli with twenty-something hip-hop fans. Politicos from Aung San Suu Kyi's party and respectable businessmen sat down with members of ethnic minorities from the provinces. Senior monks learned English verbs alongside junior monks. Political activists attended seminars on human rights and on strategic communications. Pierce and Penland encouraged the students who were reading Montesquieu and Havel to make connections with their own political predicament. In a country where the law forbids unauthorized meetings of more than five people, none of this could have happened anywhere outside the gates of the Center.

Dozens of political prisoners were released in 2005. Finding themselves unemployable and shunned by friends, many found their way to the center. They were welcomed with offers of scholarship classes. One of the former prisoners was Myat Min.

"I came out of prison not with plans but with dreams," he said. "One dream was to become a reporter." He worked as an intern at a Rangoon weekly, but his colleagues were nervous about having a former political prisoner in their midst, and he left. Barred from pursuing a degree in a Burmese university, he enrolled in courses at the American Center, including an Internet-based program with an American university, studying Latin to better understand Shakespeare and early English literature.

Myat Min still had an excitable demeanor, but he had emerged from prison with a more philosophical view, rooted in Buddhism, about the possibilities of politics in Burma. "I started soul-searching," he said. "I shouldn't have been angry that much. Freedom of expression became less important to me than freedom from anger, freedom from destruction, freedom from repentance, freedom from dilemmas. I wanted a peaceful and strong state of mind. As long as my mind is weak, I cannot do anything. I found values more important than any political ideology."

Myat Min and many other activists in his generation began to reconsider the wisdom of a head-on confrontation with a ruthless regime. But they wanted to stay in Burma, and so they began to think about changing their country in a more indirect way, beginning with their own lives—with the simple daily struggle not to abandon thought and passion, even in the face of a government that tried to smother its people. That struggle took many forms, some as apparently banal as producing a play or working to help poor children. The American Center became the focal point of these desires, and when two events in the past year shook the country—the monks' demonstrations, in September, and the devastation of Cyclone Nargis, in May—young Burmese responded in ways that, in the long term, may pose a serious threat to the rule of the generals.

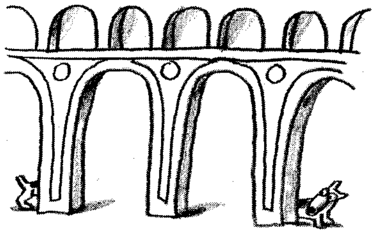
In 1987, I backpacked through Burma on a one-week visa, the maximum time allowed. I had never seen a place so untouched by the West; even Pepsi was illegal. The country was ruled by General Ne Win, who had led the 1962 coup and subsequently imposed on Burma an isolation nearly as extreme and self-destructive as North Korea's. He governed through force, paranoia, and superstition: a few weeks before my visit, Ne Win, advised by his astrologer that the number nine was auspicious, abolished all Burmese banknotes of twenty-five, thirty-five, and seventy-five kyats, replacing them with two new denominations—forty-five and ninety—that are divisible by nine and whose numerals add up to nine. Countless Burmese lost their life savings. Yet there were no major protests. In the ancient Buddhist city of Pagan, on the Upper Irrawaddy River, the manager of a guesthouse where I stayed quietly grumbled that the government didn't care if its people were ruined. My guide around Rangoon invited me to lunch at his house and he made the same muted complaint. I left agreeing with a common observation about Burma: its people were, perhaps, too gentle to rebel.

The next year, after months of small student-led demonstrations and arrests, at eight minutes past eight o'clock on the morning of August 8, 1988—numerology also holds sway over the regime's opponents—Burmese of all backgrounds took to the streets to protest the military dictatorship. As many as three thousand people were killed before the Army imposed order. Ne Win was replaced by a new group of generals, who named their junta the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The SLORC held elections in 1990; Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party won overwhelmingly, but the junta ignored the results and continued to rule as before.

Some things changed. In 1989, Burma became Myanmar and Rangoon became Yangon, and the junta is now called the State Peace and Development Council, led by Senior General Than Shwe. Luxury hotels have gone up in downtown Rangoon; there's a new terminal at the airport; and, in Mandalay, Chinese-built shopping centers have replaced entire neighborhoods. Over the past few years—at an estimated cost thus far of four billion dollars, and with the use of forced child labor—the regime has constructed a new capital, Naypyidaw, in the hot flatlands in the country's center. But since 1988, or even 1962, Burma has remained remarkably static, while its neighbors China, India, and Thailand have raced ahead.

Even its opposition politics seems frozen in time. The monks' demonstrations last September, and the violent repression by armed troops, looked like a small-scale version of the 1988 uprising, in the same rainwashed streets. Suu Kyi—"the Lady," in the almost universal indirect address—remains the country's iconic dissident figure, and her party is paralyzed as it awaits her endlessly deferred release. In its lassitude, Burma seems to be under a magic spell that only some external force can break.

During the two crises of the past year, Burmese listened to foreign news on shortwave radios and wondered if the world was about to come to their rescue. After the cyclone, the U.S.S. Essex and other Navy ships, which had been conducting joint exercises with the Thai military, floated offshore in the Andaman Sea while American officials tried to negotiate the unloading of vital relief equipment, such as heavy-lift helicopters and water-purification machines. Reports of the ships' proximity gave a lot of people in the devastated Irrawaddy Delta the hope that an armed intervention was at hand. In the end, the regime refused to allow the Essex to unload its cargo.



One night in Rangoon, I had beers with a famous artist whose work is banned by the regime. He told the story of a friend in Mandalay who became pregnant and developed a serious case of swollen feet. She was taken to the hospital, where a doctor kept bringing in medical students to examine her, without ever telling her what could be done. "When the U.N. comes here, someone always wants to see me," the artist said. "They tell me they're sorry about the situation, to be patient." These visits, he said, had begun to feel like the examination of his pregnant friend. He suddenly declared, "The only solution is for the U.S. to drop a bomb on Naypyidaw. That's the only way! Ninety per cent of Burmese would tell you the same thing. The world is very angry at America because of Iraq. If you use one per cent of the money and one per cent of the bombs here, the world will see you in a better way." It's a commonly expressed wish in Rangoon: I met a man who had hand-delivered a letter to the American Embassy, where the U.S. keeps a low-level diplomatic presence, petitioning President George W. Bush to "bombard Burma." No one at the Embassy would accept the letter, and when I advised the man not to expect an American invasion, he looked crushed. "Why?" he pleaded.

In recent years, millions of Burmese have responded to the country's seemingly incurable condition by fleeing. The poor escape to Thailand, which has up to two million migrant workers from Burma, many employed in conditions of semi-slavery; those with some means move to Singapore, London, or America. The authorities have recently made it easier to get a passport, which has only encouraged the hemorrhaging of the talented and disgruntled, so that potential threats leave the country, the competition for spoils inside is eased, and those who remain are increasingly supported by remittances from abroad. The endgame seems to be a regime virtually without citizens.

It's not clear why the junta has such an unshakable hold on power. There is no personality cult in Burma; I saw only one publicly displayed picture of Than Shwe, in the front hall of the run-down and nearly deserted National Museum. Nor does the state justify itself with relentless propaganda. Under Ne Win, the country's official ideology was a virulently nativist philosophy known as the Burmese Way to Socialism, which led to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Indian merchants after 1962 and anti-Chinese riots in 1967, and a disastrous economic policy of sweeping nationalization and closed borders. After Ne Win's fall, the junta adopted Chinese-style authoritarian capitalism, but Burma never achieved economic growth—in part because of foreign sanctions, but also because the generals insist on a cut of any new business. (According to Transparency International, Burma is the second most corrupt country in the world, after Somalia.)

"I cook everything with an alternative energy source, so it may take a while."

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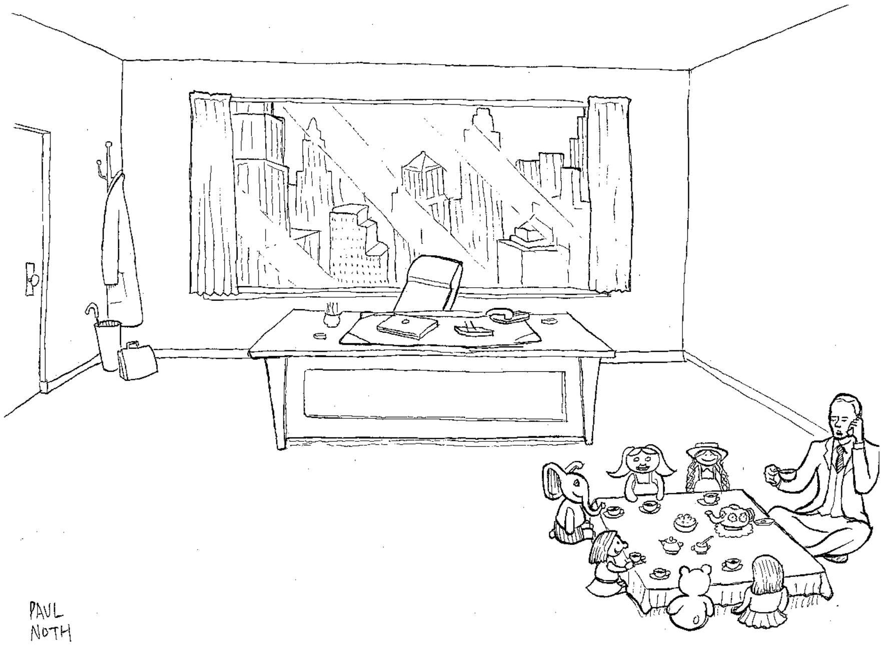
Most of Burma's top government posts are held by military officers, many of whom have a frighteningly weak grasp of governance. After a senior general went to Singapore and heard that all schools there had access to the Internet, he announced that Burmese schools would also be wired—never mind that most classrooms lacked books and paper. A Rangoon school was quickly fitted with computers and modems; the general visited, attended by the state media, and the next day everything was removed. During a dam opening attended by important officials, the river failed to flow, and Burmese upstream were ordered to gather buckets and pour in additional water.

Civil servants survive by protecting senior leaders from bad news. In an end-of-mission report, Charles Petrie, who was the chief United Nations official in Rangoon until November, called this system of denial "mutually strategic ignorance" and blamed it for "a number of disastrous economic and social policies." Following September's demonstrations, Petrie delivered remarks urging the regime to heed the monks' protest and address the growing poverty. Ten days later, Petrie and other foreign officials were summoned to Naypyidaw. The minister of planning, a hard-liner named Soe Tha, gave a long speech that attempted to rebut Petrie's remarks, using the U.N.'s own statistics. "Some of it was really funny," Petrie recalls. "He said, for example, 'The U.N. states that a third of the children under five are malnourished. That's absolutely not true. The real figure is 31.2 per cent. The U.N. states that three-quarters of an average family's income is used on food. That's actually not true. It's 68.7 per cent.' He was using our statistics to say there was no poverty—that everything was fine." After the speech, Petrie was handed a letter informing him of his expulsion.

When I asked a Burmese journalist to describe the regime's philosophy, he suggested the word *sit-padaytharit*, or "military feudalism." The generals regard the population as unruly children incapable of taking responsibility for themselves; they believe that they alone can prevent Burma from dissolving. Since independence, Burma has contended with various ideological and ethnic insurgencies. At first, the chief threat to the state came from the Communist Party, which collapsed in 1989. But regional wars fought by the central government against armies of the Karen, Shan, Kachin, and other minorities raged on, largely out of international view, creating hundreds of thousands of refugees along Burma's borders and destroying thousands of hill villages. Mass killings, rapes, and forced labor have been widely documented by Human Rights Watch. Most senior members of the junta are veterans of these wars.

In recent years, the regime has signed cease-fire agreements with most of its antagonists, allowing ethnic leaders to exploit resources such as timber, opium, and gems. The truces are the regime's one notable achievement, but the political grievances that inspired the fighting have not been resolved, and the regime remains psychologically at war. Thant Myint-U, a former U.N. official who is the grandson of the U.N. Secretary-General U Thant, frequently travels to Burma, and he has met with senior government officials there. (He is also the author of "The River of Lost Footsteps," a recent history of modern Burma.) He told me, "For the Army leadership, the country is essentially a huge counter-insurgency battlefield." When a rural school is built, he said, the purpose is not to educate local children but to win the loyalty of people in the area, in the manner of a military hearts-and-minds campaign.

National unity and the threat from for-



"I don't have that in front of me right now."

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eign and domestic agents of instability are the dominant themes of Burma's official literature. Next to my hotel in Rangoon, there was a hulking brick colonial railroad building that now garrisons a detachment of undernourished-looking soldiers. Under a banyan tree, in one corner of the grounds, at the intersection of two major streets, stood a red-and-white billboard that announced, in English, "People's Desire: Oppose Those Relying on External Elements, Acting as Stooges, Holding Negative Views. Oppose Those Trying to Jeopardize Stability of the State and Progress of the Nation. Oppose Foreign Nations Interfering in Internal Affairs of the State. Crush All Internal and External Destructive Elements as the Common Enemy." The sign was blown down in May by Cyclone Nargis, and no one bothered to put it back up. Its exhortation seemed to lack conviction. The Burmese regime has somehow preserved the mechanics of totalitarianism—the censorship board, the secret police, the armed civilian thugs, the concentration of vast wealth in a few corrupt hands, the official xenophobia, the atmosphere of distrust—without the ideological vigor.

Analysts of the regime say that Than Shwe, who is seventy-five and thought to be ill, believes himself to be the reincarnation of a Burmese king. This may explain why he named the new capital Naypyidaw—"Home of Kings." In 2005, Than Shwe announced a three-year plan to replace its forty thousand barrels of daily oil imports with homegrown biodiesel produced from the jatropha plant. (Many Burmese believe that Than Shwe hoped that growing jatropha would mystically undermine the opposition, because the Burmese name for the plant sounds like "Suu Kyi" in reverse.) Seven million acres of farmland were to be converted into jatropha plantations. Families were encouraged to grow the plant in their fields. Farmers were forced to abandon other crops, such as rice, which contributed to fears of food shortages after the cyclone. The jatropha frenzy left the country with unharvested fields, plants growing wild, and children rushed to the hospital after eating the plant, which is toxic.

Some experts explain the durability of the military regime by citing Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced by most Burmese, and which emphasizes individual salvation. Christina Fink, the author of "Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule," told me, "There are certain cultural practices that help maintain the regime. Burmese society is a hierarchical society, where obedience to authority is taught in the family, in religious institutions, in educational institutions." Fink pointed out that education in Burma was based on rote memorization, and she had found that "if you ask Burmese students to paraphrase something they cannot do it." Kit Young, an American musician who lived for many years in Rangoon, and who founded a music school there, told me that the Burmese word for deference is *anade*, which involves an unwillingness to make people feel uncomfortable. "You skirt, you go around things," she said.

I once asked a teacher in Rangoon, a woman whose refined manners did not conceal her hatred of the regime, why attempts to destabilize the government through targeted attacks were so rare. "We can blame the religion, and we can blame the live-and-let-live attitude of the Burmese," she said. "Even people like me, unless we go out of the country from time to time to refresh our minds, we become conditioned to the suppression. We are fearful without knowing we are fearful, and we are submissive without knowing we are submissive."

Perhaps the most convincing explanation for the persistence of the junta was given by a Burmese economics professor to a local journalist I met. "Other regimes are interdependent with the people," the professor said. "Here the government isn't dependent on the people, and the people aren't dependent on the government. When there's no electricity or water, you get it yourself." In other words, the regime has endured because it is not distracted by an effort to provide good government. Myat Min told me that this is why I saw so few security men on the streets of Rangoon: crushing the life out of the population is their only task, and so they have learned to do it with supreme efficiency.

Even in a country of small people, Thar Gyi, as I'll call him, was a wisp of a man, with sleek eyeglasses, tousled hair, and wrists the size of an American third grader's. One day in February, we sat at a table on the grounds of the American Center, under an umbrella that shielded us from the tropical sun. In a calm voice that barely rose above a whisper, Thar Gyi told me about his passion—contemporary theatre, which is practically nonexistent in Burma.

In 1998, when he was twenty, he was arrested for participating in a student demonstration on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi's party. The next year, he received a seven-year sentence. Confined to Insein prison, Thar Gyi fell into despair when he met dissidents who had been incarcerated multiple times. "I meet some people, older people. They're just telling their old stories, the political history of our country, and I feel sorry for them," he said. "They want to help their community, but they only sit in their cell, telling the old stories. I got a new idea from them. My idea is that I want to do something outside prison, so I can help other people. Maybe I'm a results-oriented person, and in prison we don't get results. That's labor lost."

Thar Gyi's sentence was reduced, and he was released in 2002. (He called himself lucky.) He came out of prison with two strong desires: not to end up back in prison or in exile, like so many other activists, and to teach the arts to young people. With the help of an English teacher at the American Center named Phillip Howse, he worked on a series of theatrical productions. He stage-managed a performance of "Romeo and Juliet" at a night club that later burned down. In 2006, he helped direct a production of the musical "Rent," at the American Center. The show's portrait of New York during the AIDS crisis still felt current in Rangoon, where the disease is rampant. To underscore this connection, Thar Gyi handed out twenty free tickets to Burmese youths infected with H.I.V.

On his own, he staged a production of Sartre's "No Exit." He had borrowed a copy of the play from the American Center. "The title caught my attention," he said. "Sometimes my brain is blocked by something, and I can't get through that block and find the answer. That is a human theme." One afternoon, "No Exit" was performed, in English, in a cramped and sweltering apartment; the windows were covered to block out the sunlight. The state requires all group events to be vetted and cleared by the authorities—not only to stop the flow of unsanctioned ideas but also to prevent people from gathering in one place. Thar Gyi told the neighborhood authorities that English-language classes were being held at the apartment.

"No Exit" was embraced by its audience, and there were several additional performances. Thar Gyi's production had highlighted the similarities between Sartre's claustrophobic scenario, with characters trapped by forces beyond their control, and the suffocated existence of the average young Burmese growing up in a tiny Rangoon apartment.

Through theatre, Thar Gyi hoped to encourage young Burmese to develop their talents and transcend inertia and helplessness. He no longer wanted to focus on displacing the regime, and he even found the American Center's more political activities misguided. "American people say that political changes will change the conditions in our country," Thar Gyi said. "That's true. But I think we need to develop our own capacities. We are not ready for democracy. We don't have any good platform, good foundation, to get those changes." He spoke of the garbage that often blocked the drains, flooding the streets of Rangoon. Residents complained that the city was dirty, he said. "Where does that garbage come from? People throw it recklessly. When there was a flood, people said that is the responsibility of Yangon City Development Committee. It was their fault!" Thar Gyi's whisper gave his voice a strange urgency. "But you can't just say, 'You should take the responsibility!' That's why I want to use the arts. I want to teach people critical thinking."

The tradition of reading groups in Burma goes back to the nineteen-twenties, when the Burma Book Club was established by a British anthropologist named John S. Furnivall. Under Burma's successive dictatorships, these clubs have met in secret, serving as forums for political discussion among groups of trusted friends. Ideas tend to reach Burma piecemeal twenty or thirty years after they've had their moment elsewhere. After the protests of 1988, intellectuals turned away from Marxism and embraced the existentialism of Camus and Sartre, Orwell's anti-totalitarian fictions, and Kafka. Recently, fragments from Jacques Derrida and the post-structuralists have begun to be championed in Rangoon as the latest model for the dismantling of tyranny.

In early 2007, a book club began meeting on Saturday afternoons at the American Center. The group's leaders were in their thirties and forties; many had become acquainted in prison. Each of them brought into the club one or two Burmese in their twenties who had no political experience. At its height, the club had forty members. Its purpose was to reach across the gap between the '88 Generation, which had been locked away for so many years, and younger people, for whom, as one woman in the club put it, the events of 1988 were "a fairy tale."

Over time, about ten of the younger students dropped out, after intelligence officers spoke to them and their university teachers. The leaders assumed that the club had been infiltrated by at least one government spy, and so they reserved the most sensitive topics—about Burmese politics and opposition strategy—for conversations outside the classroom.

One of the leaders was a writer in her late thirties, who asked to be identified as

"Here out West there are so many incredible places to smoke."

Devastation after Cyclone Nargis and a military mural in Rangoon; the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi with a pictu

Hnin Se. "We didn't expect that much from these young people," she told me in Rangoon. "But the topics they raised were surprising. Some raised the question 'Why is this nation different from the rest of the world?' They knew the answer. They asked the question because they couldn't control their feelings." One of the students' favorite books was "Heroes Without Capes"—a Burmese collection of profiles of ordinary people who, in small ways, defied the authorities in order to improve the world immediately around them.

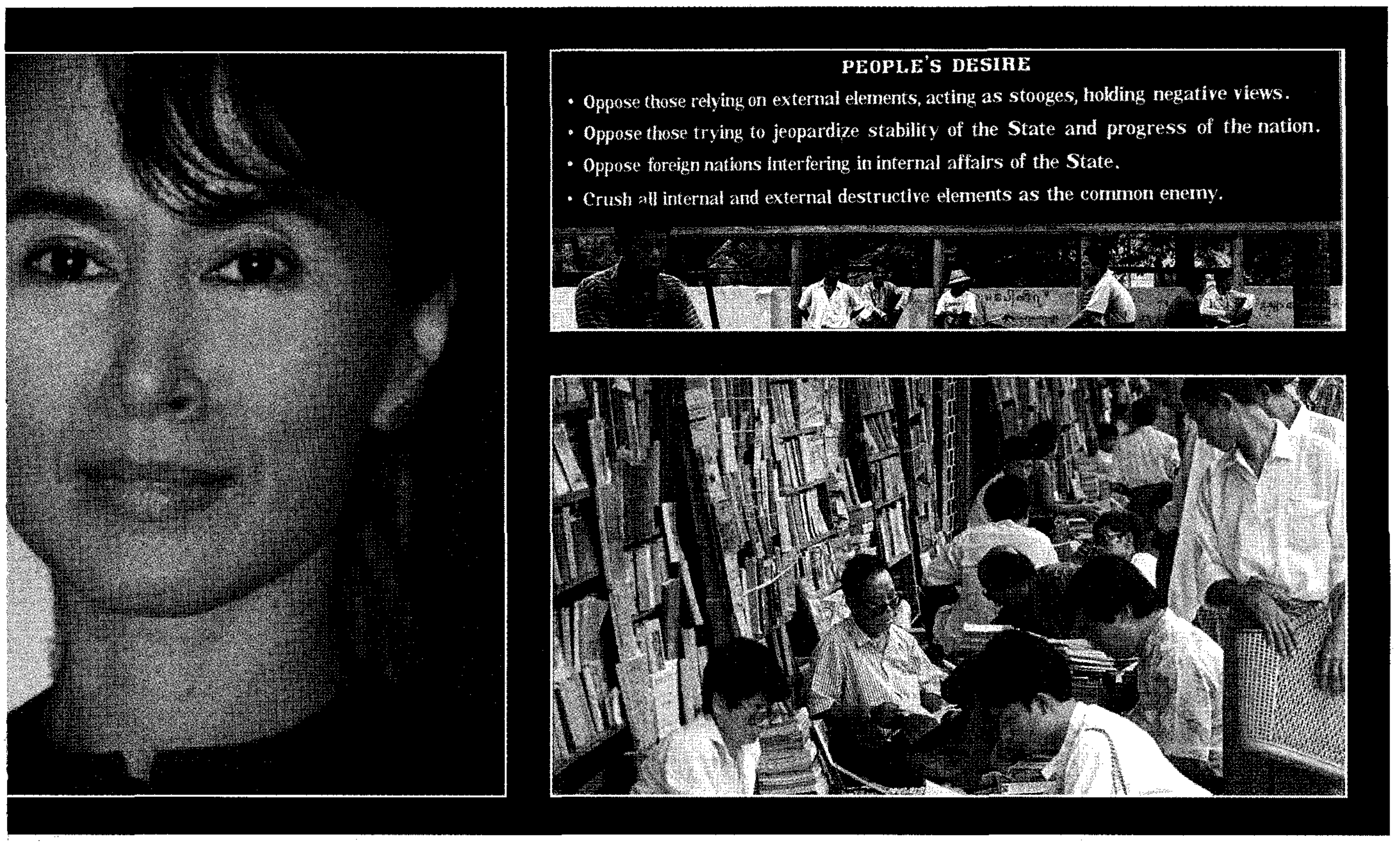
Hnin Se is tall and slender, with black hair flowing down her back; she cuts it short during times of crisis. She maintains the outward calm that is typical of the Burmese, but once, when I asked how the rule of the generals could ever end, she hissed, "Kill them all." She grew up in a fishing village in the Irrawaddy Delta. Her mother was a teacher and her father owned an ice factory; he took to drink and left the family, but not before encouraging his daughter's artistic temperament. By the age of six, Hnin Se had read "Gone with the Wind" in Burmese. At fourteen, she was sent to Rangoon to continue her education, and for years she picked up dried fish and rice sent by her mother to the Rangoon jetty and sold them in Aung San Market to support the family. She was in her third year at Rangoon University, and just beginning to write fiction, when the events of August, 1988, took place. She saw police driving students into Inya Lake—where many drowned—and beating and shooting others who tried to escape. "As a nineteen-year-old girl, I might not have any knowledge about democracy," she said, "but I had the sense to distinguish right from wrong." In 1991, she distributed poems protesting the government's refusal to let Aung San Suu Kyi, who had won the Nobel Peace Prize, travel to Oslo. Hnin Se was arrested and sent to Insein. When she first laid eyes on the prison, she smiled. "I was already a writer, and I thought this would be a new experience," she said.

For the crime of opening her cell window, Hnin Se spent her early imprisonment on death row, in a block with condemned women. They had to remain silent during the day, but at night they talked through six-inch holes in their cell doors and sang Burmese popular songs. The women developed a deep solidarity, and Hnin Se made several close friends in prison, two of whom later joined the book club.

She was released in a general amnesty in 1992, and spent the next several years on the run, sometimes forced to sell dried fish and rice again. It was also the most prolific period of her life, and she became noted for her short stories. But the novel that she really wanted to write—about the political evolution of a Burmese girl—eluded her. She married, had two children, and moved into a narrow two-story house of wood and brick in eastern Rangoon, filled with books: Katharine Graham's "Personal History"; André Maurois's "The Art of Living," translated into English; and Burmese translations of Mahfouz and García Márquez. Instead of resuming political activity, she threw herself into work on behalf of the Burmese poor. It was a way for her to engage in social change without risking a return to Insein.

On a hazy Sunday morning in February, at the beginning of the hot season, we drove out of Rangoon, across the wide, sluggish Hlaing River, into a marshy landscape dotted with low-slung industrial buildings. Just off the highway, down a dirt road lined with banana trees and palm groves, was a village of five hundred families. Next to a muddy lily pond stood a monastery—two stories, with a rusted metal pagoda-style roof and walls of re-

TOP LEFT: CORBIS; BOTTOM LEFT: STEVE McCURRY/MAGNUM


PEOPLE'S DESIRE
• Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views.
• Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation.
• Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State.
• Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

her father, the independence hero Aung San; a propaganda billboard and one of Rangoon's many bookstalls.

MIDDLE: NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY/CORBIS; TOP RIGHT: MANON OTT; BOTTOM RIGHT: CHARLES DHARAPAK/AP

claimed boards and woven thatch. In these cramped quarters, monks ran a school for three hundred students, including sixty orphans. Hnin Se and four friends from her book club were helping to support the school, and had raised about a thousand dollars.

The junior monks and novices slept on planks on the lower level, in a sort of glorified crawl space. Upstairs, children were scattered across the floor, learning lessons. At lunchtime, young monks served rice, beans, and fish paste from huge cooking pots. The abbot received us on the floor of his little office, which was also his bedroom; piles of red-brown robes had been neatly folded before a golden Buddha. Hnin Se knelt before the abbot, brought her hands together, and bowed her head to the floor. The abbot was forty-six years old and from central Burma, the heartland of the *sangha*, or monkhood.

Hnin Se and the abbot spoke to me about the challenges of funding the school. “It's very difficult to feed everyone in this compound,” she said. “So we pool the money from donations in a bank and get some interest.”

“We need at least fifty dollars a day,” the abbot said. This paid for two meatless meals daily. Ordinarily, monks live off alms, which they collect as they walk in a line through local neighborhoods, their begging bowls held out. But poverty has grown so deep and food prices so high that people can't spare enough to feed the monks; many Burmese eat only once a day. At the same time, with fees for government schools out of reach, families increasingly bring their children to monasteries for a free education. The *sangha* is Burma's safety net, but every year the monks have to do more with less.

The abbot was locked in a struggle with local authorities who were conspiring to sell the monastery's land to factory owners across the highway. (Three hundred families from the village had already been displaced.) Every day, it seemed, there was a confrontation between the monks and the authorities. There was nothing passively transcendent about the monks I met in Burma. Their bare shoulders and biceps revealing robust physiques, they often reminded me of labor organizers or political strategists. When a company man showed up one morning to measure a piece of the land, a young monk came out to meet him, quarrelled, and punched him in the jaw.

“They want us to smile, we have to smile,” the abbot said of the government. “They want us to cry, we have to cry. We are living with our body but with their soul.” I asked him about the attitude of soldiers, most of whom are Buddhists, toward monks. “They're from another planet,” he said. “They fear their commanders more than they fear punishment in the next life.”

A visitor arrived: a matronly woman from Rangoon with oversized glasses had come to pray, as she did every Sunday. Seeing us, she bowed obsequiously. The abbot told me that she was a member of the regime's civilian mass movement, and that she was sent to keep an eye on him.

As Hnin Se and I left the monastery, four men in green *longyis* stood by and watched us. Something as small as a group of friends taking on a charitable project was irregular enough to arouse suspicion, and a foreigner meant nothing but trouble. We drove away without looking back.

The leaders of the ’88 Generation who were released from prison in 2004 and 2005 waited a year or more before attempting any public actions. They then made the kind of simple, earnest gestures that give the Burmese democratic opposition its air of moral depth and political naïveté. There was the Open Heart Campaign, in which citizens wrote letters to Than Shwe describing their hardships. Then, there were White Sundays, when activists dressed in the color of purity and visited the families of political prisoners still behind bars. None of the '88 leaders seemed to have a long-term vision, but the formal opposition party, the National League for Democracy, was moribund—waiting patiently for Suu Kyi to release statements—and someone had to fill the void.

Last August, the regime abruptly announced that fuel subsidies would be eliminated, thereby doubling the price of bus fare in Rangoon. In spite of Burma's nearly three billion dollars in annual natural-gas sales, the national budget had critical shortfalls. The policy change forced thousands of people to walk instead of taking the bus. On August 19th, ten members of the '88 Generation held an emergency meeting and decided to test the junta. Their goal was to force a dialogue between the government and Suu Kyi. (An activist who attended the meeting told me, "Asking for regime change isn't very practical.") Later that day, a small group of activists entered the streets of Rangoon and, in solidarity with the working poor, began to walk—no signs, no chanting, no colors. Even so, the regime pounced. On August 21st, a dozen leaders of the new movement were arrested. (They are once again serving long sentences in Insein, often in solitary confinement.) The rest went into hiding. The moment of protest, now leaderless, appeared to be over.

Then, on September 5th, in the town of Pakokku, twenty miles up the Irrawaddy River from the magnificent medieval temples of Pagan, several hundred monks took to the streets chanting the *metta sutta*, the Buddhist scripture that urges a universal extension of kindness: "As a mother would risk her life/To protect her child, her only child,/Even so should one cultivate a limitless heart/With regard to all beings." It was clearly a continuation of the aborted August movement.

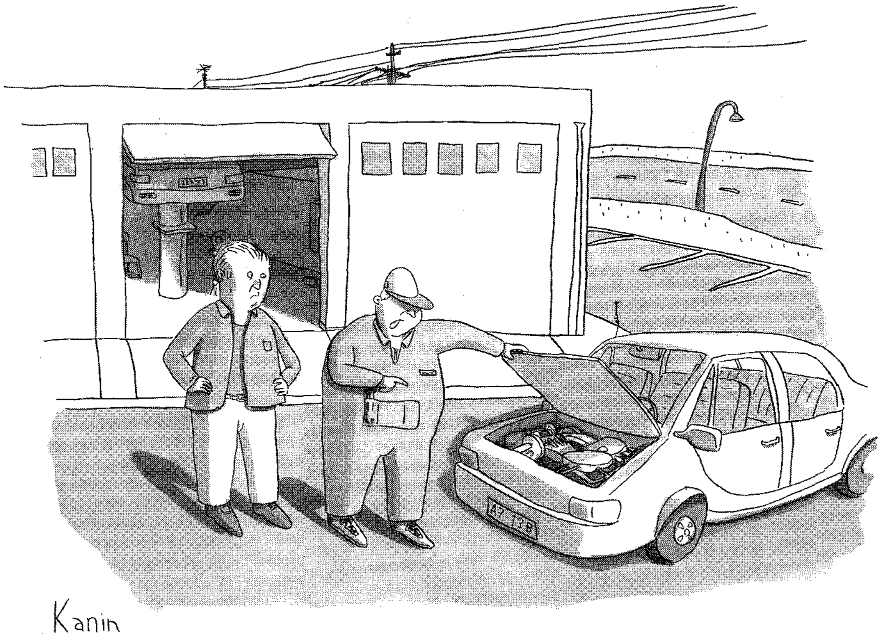
Monks have been politicized throughout modern Burmese history. The *sangha* led demonstrations against British rule and has played a part in every eruption of protest since 1962. "When Burmese people suffer, normally they don't dare to speak out," a monk who later fled to the Thai border town of Mae Sot said. "So we express their suffering for them." Thousands of townspeople in Pakokku cheered the monks, until the security forces moved in, firing over the monks' heads and tying some of them to utility poles and beating them with rifles. News of this violence—shocking in a country where monks are revered—spread quickly.

On September 9th, in Mandalay, half a dozen leaders from the most activist monasteries gathered in secret. They communicated in code, by mobile phone. ("Let's meet where we had tea together the last time.") At the meeting, they formed the All Burma Monks Alliance, an illegal act—monks, like all Burmese, are forbidden to form non-sanctioned organizations. The Alliance made four demands of the regime: apologize for the incident in Pakokku; lower commodity prices; release all political prisoners, including Suu Kyi; begin a dialogue with the opposition. The regime had nine days, until September 18th, to respond. The monk in Mae Sot, who attended the meeting, recalls, "I said, 'September 18th is good,' because the military took back power that day in 1988." He also pointed out the numerological significance of a deadline nine days after September 9th: 9+9+2+0+0+7=27. "The generals are superstitious. I knew they would go through these calculations."

The monks were aware that their demands would not be met—certainly, an apology from the generals was unimaginable. The list was strategic: the regime would look intransigent, allowing the monks to ratchet up the pressure. In general, the monks I interviewed were far more unsentimental in their political calculations than students and artists were; they thought like dedicated organizers who understood just how long and hard the battle would be. The monk in Mae Sot, who had the handshake of a stevedore, seemed to suggest even that the monks knew that lethal force was inevitable, and could work to their advantage. When I asked him whether he had studied the experiences of Gandhi and King, he smiled. "There was a movement earlier than them," he said. "And that is the teachings of Buddha."

September 18th came, with no response from the government. The monks began making peaceful marches to holy sites in Rangoon and Mandalay, with Burmese and foreign journalists contacted in advance to document the protests. (According to the monk in Mae Sot, there was a high-level meeting after each day's demonstration focussing on next-day planning and media outreach.) At first, the Alliance barred laypeople from joining the demonstrations, in order to preserve the spiritual character of the movement, but the entreaties of the public

"It's my youth, and I don't have to enjoy it if I don't want to."



"I don't know what's wrong, but, if you open and close the hood like this, it looks like your car is talking."

• •

eventually compelled the monks to let them participate, in the form of human chains, lining either side of the monks' single-file columns. On September 21st, the demonstrations were formally opened to all. The next day, a group of monks in Rangoon walked down University Avenue, along Inya Lake, and cowed the police who stood at the barricades on the road to Aung San Suu Kyi's house. The Lady herself was at the front gate, with tears in her eyes. Pictures and news of the encounter were transmitted by local journalists to international outlets and to publications run by Burmese in exile; these stories were soon posted on Web sites accessible to people inside Burma. The effect of this media boomerang was to send tens of thousands more Burmese into the streets.

Among them were members of Hnin Se's book group and other students from the American Center. Hnin Se was out of the country at the time, but she learned, with pride, that four of her students, while protesting, had raised the flag of the banned All Burma Student Union, which depicted a fighting peacock. They called themselves the 2007 Student Union.

Throughout the uprising, the American Center was a crucial point of contact, where monks, youths, and '88ers could exchange messages that were otherwise too dangerous to transmit. Monks and students who had never encountered the might of the state got on the phone with veteran '88ers, and received tactical advice.

The September protests were led by a core of monks, but in downtown Rangoon the swelling crowds were essentially leaderless. A thirty-year-old blogger in Rangoon explained to me that this "decentralized" movement stood a better chance of surviving than the '88 version. "The brain of this government cannot understand postmodernism," he said. "In September, the trend of the demonstration was just like postmodernism, because it started everywhere. There's no main direction. When the government tried to arrest the leader of the demonstration, they could not find him or her."

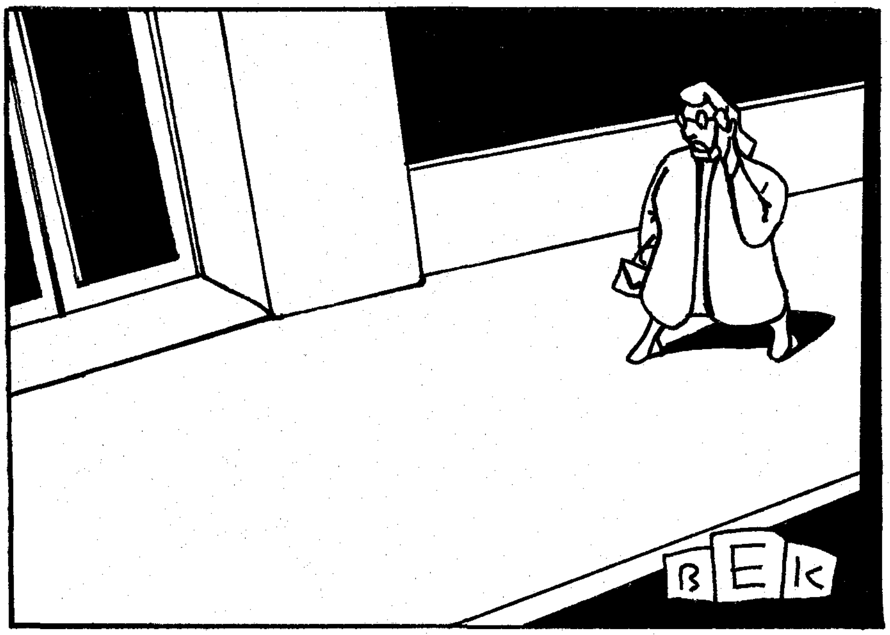
Yet the September protests ended up conforming to the narrative structure of all the others. On September 25th and 26th, the soldiers of the 66th and 77th Light Infantry Divisions arrived in Rangoon, and began shooting monks and unarmed civilians. A lanky, guitar-loving sixteen-year-old boy was swept up in the protests and found himself outside a high school in the district of Tamwe. There he saw soldiers and militiamen shoot a monk in the head and drive an Army truck into a group of students carrying the peacock flag. The prospect of killing monks made some members of the regime pause. In Mandalay, it is widely believed, the regional commander cut a deal with the monks' leaders; no shots were fired. Burma's ruling council of ten generals was reportedly divided on whether to use force. Those in favor of violence won out, seven to three.

Two days into the crackdown, in which unknown numbers were killed—Burmese I spoke with claimed several dozen—the protests fizzled out. Thousands of people were arrested, monasteries were raided, and student leaders were rounded up. Among Hnin Se's students, three were jailed (one with a head injury so severe that he still hasn't recovered) and a fourth escaped to Thailand.

The American Center was one of the government's main targets. Most of the book group's leaders were arrested. The debate club stopped meeting, and the political-discussion class was disbanded.

On December 3rd, at the Ministry of Information in Naypyidaw, Khin Yi, the head of the Burmese police force, spoke at a press conference and presented the regime's version of the September events—the speech was headlined "Myanmar Government Really Desires Democracy." By then, enough arrested activists had been tortured, revealing the names of other participants, and a coherent story could be assembled. The government's facts were at least partly true: money had come from foreign organizations (George Soros's Open Society Institute, which has given almost forty million dollars to the Burmese democracy movement since 1994, was named several times); training had been provided in Rangoon at the American Center, as well as in Mae Sot; monks and students who had met in prison had become the leaders of a new wave of opposition whose ultimate goal was regime change. These facts were filtered through an outraged paranoia that could name names but had no grasp of motives. The police chief maintained that "bogus monks" and other subversives had been directed from abroad to act "under the pretext of the increase of fuel prices" and "disrupt law and order, and destabilize the peace and tranquillity of the State."

Thar Gyi, the theatre director, did not join the September protests. "I analyze that situation," he said five months later. "I'm not a professor of political science, but



"We divided it up so I do everything right and he does everything wrong."

I have some experience, and I look at things and say, 'This is not an endgame.'"

Myat Min joined the marchers, and, although they were largely peaceful, he was disturbed by what he saw. "Many people were in a state of rage, hysteria—throwing bottles. Very few people realize the power of silence. Silence is harder to crush. We were expecting a few leaders who, like Gandhi, can meet their death very calmly. We didn't see that, and we were very disappointed." A friend of his from prison said, "The only one like that is Aung San Suu Kyi," and he added that the September events "had a very good form, but less content." The monks, they said, had chanted the *metta sutta* without genuine loving-kindness. There was still anger in their hearts. I told Myat Min and his friend that they had come out of prison with extremely high standards for politics. They didn't deny it.

For the past two decades, American policy toward Burma has been to isolate the regime through sanctions. This policy has been pursued as a moral response to a deplorable government, without much regard for its effectiveness. In Washington, Burma is an afterthought: a handful of senators pay attention to the issue, and a handful of advocates have their ear. A Western diplomat in Rangoon told me, "American foreign policy has been outsourced to the exiles and their patrons on the Hill. There's a lack of interest at the State Department in Burma." The diplomat added, "Sanctions are a joke—they're just a pressure release. The generals don't care what the rest of the world thinks about them, because they don't think about the rest of the world. What they care about is their financial and physical security."

Win Min, an analyst of the Burmese military who lives in Thailand, told me, "Burmese military officers say that they have three cards to play in the international community: China, India, and ASEAN"—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "They say they don't need to worry as long as they have these cards." China and India have been competing for contracts to explore offshore oil and gas, and to build a gas pipeline across Burma. Thailand, a member of ASEAN, buys most of Burma's gas and other commodities.

These economic relationships have always trumped moral concerns. Last September, after the world saw pictures of monks and civilians being shot in Rangoon, China, which sells arms to the regime, issued the mildest expression of concern, then tried to prevent the U.N. Security Council from even discussing Burma. India said nothing, and at the height of the crackdown its petroleum minister signed a gas contract in Naypyidaw. ASEAN, which admitted Burma as a member in 1997, officially deplored the violence. Two months later, Ibrahim Gambari, of Nigeria, the U.N. envoy to Burma, was scheduled to give a briefing at an ASEAN meeting in Singapore on the prospect of talks between the Burmese government and Aung San Suu Kyi. At a dinner two nights earlier, the Burmese Prime Minister, Thein Sein, announced to his ASEAN counterparts that Burma would walk out if Gambari was allowed to speak. The briefing was cancelled.

Burma is one of those countries, like Zimbabwe and Sudan, whose brutal rulers have successfully defied Washington and managed to make America seem impotent in its self-righteousness. The occupation of Iraq has been a boon to the Burmese generals. The idea, popular in the nineteen-nineties, that the world may intervene in countries whose governments show no regard for human life is now seen as reflecting Western arrogance; China's approach of tolerating human-rights abuses in the name of stability and non-interference has become the standard. While the West stays out of Burma, Chinese businessmen are making huge investments in Mandalay, pulling the country's economy toward the Chinese border. Rather than being a throwback to a more benighted age, Burma might be a picture of the geopolitical future.

The American policy of isolating Burma is largely considered a failure. But, if reforming the regime is the goal, the alternative policy—economic engagement, along the lines of Burma's neighbors—has also failed. Every year, the junta grows stronger while the country sinks deeper into poverty. A Burmese journalist explained, "The regime here, unlike regimes elsewhere, is trying to *prevent* the formation of a middle class." Sean Turnell, an economist and a Burma expert at Macquarie University, in Sydney, said, "The biggest sanction on Burma is the regime: no investment, no property law, no rule of law, restrictions on exports and imports, corruption off the dial." He pointed out that Burma's sale of natural gas is recorded at the official exchange rate of six Burmese kyats per dollar, whereas the real rate is more like twelve hundred kyats. These clandestine profits are sent offshore or hoarded in Naypyidaw. "It's like a spouse not declaring his income and making the family starve, even though he's earning a

Wall Street salary," Turnell said. According to Thiha Saw, the editor of a business magazine in Rangoon, there has been no public budget in Burma since 2000.

The hope—and it isn't much more than that—of critics of American policy is that a new generation of military officers will come to power with the understanding that government by plunder has hit diminishing returns. Thant Myint-U said that the pragmatists among Burma's leaders-in-waiting will be helped if international pressure eases. "If there's one thing that's fuelled Burma's many problems over the last half century, it's been its isolation. If outside economic relationships are reduced to a few oil companies, Chinese logging companies, and twelve U.N. agencies, it's easy for the generals to play games. If we're talking about thousands of individual business relationships, even if it leads to a certain amount of corruption, you'll have a much more open political space." But Win Min argues that only a combination of international pressure and engagement can bring about reform. "In the history of the Burmese military, pragmatists have never got the upper hand," he said.

Even the staunchest opponents of the regime—such as Maureen Aung-Thwin, of the Open Society Institute's Burma project, which funds civic and political activities inside and outside Burma—acknowledge that the military will have to play a role in any transition to democracy. Having strangled civil society, hollowed out the bureaucracy, and locked up the political opposition, the Army can rightly claim to be the only institution capable of running things. The junta held a referendum in May on a new constitution that mandates elections in 2010 and a central role for the military in future governments. (The referendum passed; open criticism of the plan was punishable by twenty years in prison.) The opposition is deeply divided on whether or not to go along with this "road map." In general, I found dissidents inside the country more willing than the political opposition in exile to accept the inevitable compromises through which they might escape a life under the generals' cruel delusions. They don't want foreigners to boycott Burma; they long for contact with the world. At the same time, they are less likely than outsiders to be gulled by the regime's feints toward openness. "In historical terms, fifty years is not a long period," a journalist in Rangoon said. "So we may not get to enjoy democracy in our lifetimes. But my son or grandson—I'm sure of that."

On April 29th, the Burmese government announced that rain showers, with winds of forty-five miles an hour, were approaching the southern coast, from the Bay of Bengal. The population never learned what was coming until Nargis, a Category 4 cyclone, made landfall on May 2nd, with winds three times as strong. Nargis raged all night, and the storm surge drowned much of the Irrawaddy Delta in twelve feet of water. Whole villages vanished. Families tried to survive by climbing palm trees in the darkness and holding on until the morning; afterward, the corpses of parents and children were found with their wrists lashed to one another. At least a hundred and thirty thousand people died, making Nargis the worst natural disaster in Burma's history.

In Rangoon, a computer programmer watched the storm from the seventh floor of a building in Chinatown that swayed in the wind. Satellite dishes and water tanks flew off rooftops; boats blew back and forth across the river. In the morning, he went out with his son and found a city that had lost most of its great old trees. For the next two or three days, there was scarcely any government presence on the streets. Citizens were trying to remove the trees blocking the roads with handsaws. No news was coming in from the devastated delta. It was as if the government had ceased to exist.

"I realized we must do this ourselves," the programmer said. His cell phone was still working, and he called friends in Upper Burma, asking them to send down bags of rice. By the fifth day, he and his friends in Rangoon had organized themselves into an emergency-relief team, bringing supplies to refugees who had gathered in makeshift camps at schools and monasteries. At one site, the first evidence of civil authority appeared in the form of two policemen, who demanded to know what the programmer and his friends were doing. A monk shouted at the officers, "This is the job you should be doing!" The policemen backed away before the refugees could turn into a mob.

The night of the storm, a wave of water entered Hnin Se's small house and destroyed her books. She had written in an essay that she let herself cry only when she was outside the country. This time, she could not contain her despair.

The next morning, she ventured out and met people who had lost their entire houses. "I realized their situation was worse than mine," she said. "And I wanted to help." A friend from the delta arrived to tell her that he had lost eight nephews and nieces. A week after the storm, Hnin Se and her husband managed to reach the delta. She saw fifteen corpses—floating in rivers, sprawled on the banks, flung into flooded rice paddies. Somehow, being amid the destruction made her feel strong again, because at least she was doing something.

I returned to Burma a month after the storm. Rangoon looked emptier and far less green, as if the ravenous urban decay had consumed whole buildings and trees. In the park around Shwedagon Pagoda, trunks and branches had been cut and stacked like firewood; the root systems, torn out of the earth, were too massive to move, and lay in agonized poses. But the Burmese had a feverish sense of purpose. Everyone I had met on my first trip was collecting relief supplies for the delta, with no thought of returning to normal routine. They barely had time to sleep, and many of them fell ill after taking arduous trips south, amid monsoon rains. Hnin Se was leading a group of friends to the delta twice a week. The students at Kit Young's music school were running convoys of trucks to the delta; in one refugee center, children had drawn pictures of the night when the world seemed to be ending. Thar Gyi was living in the delta town of Labutta, organizing theatre games for cyclone orphans who were numb—except when it rained and they were terrified.

Myat Min and two friends from prison also made trips to the delta, then realized that there were refugees around Rangoon who were getting no help. In an e-mail, Myat Min wrote an account of one visit to refugees in Hlaing Tharyar, across the river from the city. "We really wanted to buy them bamboos and plastic sheets," he said. "But we did not do that, believing many of them who are eager to start small businesses would resell those materials at a lower price." Instead, Myat Min and his friends donated food and clothing, including a hundred dresses. He went on, "Before we left, we made some secret cash donations."

A Burmese journalist, speaking of the students, told me, "The American Center opened their eyes." Then, he said, Nargis set them in motion. Several years ago, foreign-aid workers debated whether, after four decades of dictatorship, anything like civil society still existed in Burma. The question was answered by Nargis. When I arrived, the government was harassing the volunteer convoys and throwing bureaucratic obstacles in front of foreign-aid workers. The World Food Program was haggling with the authorities to bring in ten helicopters scavenged from places like Uganda and Ukraine. American and French warships were idling offshore with relief equipment, while the government tried to figure out if they were preparing to invade. Nothing was working except the artists' associations, the small businesses, the hiking clubs, the student groups, and the networks of friends that are barely allowed to exist in Burma.

"They have become a movement," Thiha Saw, the magazine editor, said. "They are writers, comedians, engineers, doctors, small groups—but they become like activists."

It was only a matter of time before the junta recognized the emerging threat. In June, the government arrested seven members of a group that was collecting rotting corpses around the delta and giving them proper burials. During my visit, a famous comedian named Zaganar was arrested after trying to send footage from the delta to the exile media. (I had tried to interview Zaganar on my first trip, but I arrived early at the restaurant where we were to meet and caught the cleaning staff wiretapping the room; our lunch had to be cancelled.)

One morning in mid-June, I drove east of Rangoon with Myat Min and his friends to visit a refugee encampment. After we crossed the Bago River, a group of three policemen stopped us at a roadside checkpoint and demanded that we turn around. "Insurgent area," one of the officers explained cheerfully. Myat Min had a hard time suppressing a laugh. "They don't want foreign eyes in the affected areas," he said.

We then drove to another camp, on the west side of Rangoon, near the monastery that Hnin Se helped support. In a drenching rain, we found forty-seven families living along a muddy path under blue tarps donated by the Red Cross. The husbands were away at jobs in a dye factory; the wives crouched on bamboo slats with their children, who appeared ill and listless. One woman laughed when I asked if they had enough to eat.

ISOLA BELLA

In the stony garden
with the bronze plaque
that misquotes her

she called down
from the terrace, "Friend or
foe?" She carried a

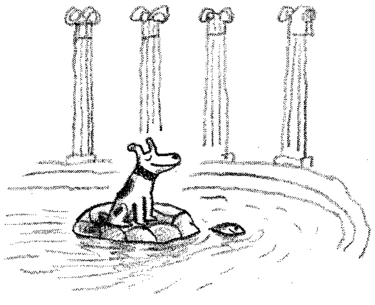
parasol. Her hair
was a shiny cap,
her face a mask.

"Friend of friends," I
answered—"Lawrence . . .
Carco . . . Bertie Russell . . ."

At each name the mask
half-revealed a half-
smile. Light struck up

"Regime change can happen in many ways besides mass revolution," Myat Min said later. He said that after the September events and the cyclone Burmese society was unravelling. "We will see more chaos than organized struggle against the regime," he said. "But I also sense the end of the regime is getting nearer and nearer."

Six weeks after the storm, the Burmese government and international-aid groups were still negotiating the rules under which relief workers could operate in the delta. On the whiteboard at the Save the Children office in Rangoon, a chart that tracked travel requests noted in numerous cases "Lost in D.S.W.!"—the Department of Social Welfare. An aid official, fuming, said to me, "We're trying to uphold pure humanitarian standards—that's a concept the generals don't recognize. We're always trying to control the idiocy of their actions, because it always gets interpreted negatively outside and has a major impact on people's willingness to help."



After the storm, senior American military officers tried to persuade their Burmese counterparts to allow them to unload relief supplies. Admiral Timothy J. Keating, of the U.S. Pacific Command, met Vice-Admiral Soe Thein, the chief of the Burmese Navy, at the old Rangoon airport terminal. According to a Burmese man who attended the meeting, Soe Thein said to Keating, the commander of all American forces in the Pacific, "Everything is O.K. You're just a little late." This was on May 12th, when most survivors in the delta had not yet received any help. Keating proposed that a Burmese officer ride along on American helicopter relief flights, but Soe Thein brushed away the offer. When an American civilian pressed him about the condition of refugees, he gathered his maps and said, "This meeting is over."

Hnin Se, whose hair was now cut short, had made ten trips to the Delta, bringing rice and clothing to remote villages that had received almost no help. She was suffering from exhaustion. The authorities were telling groups like hers to hand over their supplies. Unauthorized

off the Baie de
Garavan. It glittered
in the palms and

molded cypress and
pine. I wanted to
tell her I knew

her name for Jack
was Deadly Poison.
The villa's yellow

mimicked the shade
of Alp-rock looming
behind as a train

went through, and the
sea preened itself in
the sky's blue mirror.

—*C. K. Stead*

foreigners were being sent back to Rangoon and, in a few cases, expelled from the country, but Hnin Se offered to take me to the delta.

We left Rangoon in a pre-dawn rain. Hnin Se, wearing jeans and a head scarf, had somehow commandeered what seemed to be a rusted-out city bus. Inside were eighteen young Burmese, of whom she was the clear leader—two booksellers, a goldsmith, a photocopy attendant, a former soldier, a graduate student reading "Colonial Policy and Practice," by John S. Furnivall, the founder of the Burma Book Club. The bus rattled and bounced through mud and rain down to the delta, with a hundred fifty-kilo sacks of rice ballasting the rear. We hit a police checkpoint, and Hnin Se gestured for me to disappear under the hood of my windbreaker. But it was early Sunday morning, the search was cursory, and we were waved on after being given a flyer that said, essentially, "Do Not Feed the Cyclone Victims."

At mid-morning, we arrived in a town called Kun Chan Kone and boarded a fifty-foot boat—home to a fishing family who had lost their house in the storm. As we sailed down the Toe River, a mile-wide branch of the Irrawaddy, Hnin Se's friends gazed at the palm-lined shore, where there had once been village after village. There appeared to be nothing left.

The Irrawaddy Delta is a labyrinth of waterways that wind toward the Bay of Bengal; many are almost impossible to navigate. For hours, we drifted slowly in fog and drizzle along narrow channels, the overhanging branches of damaged trees scraping the deck. On either side of us, paddies were flooded and, although the monsoon rice season was nearing its height, there was little sign of planting or plowing. The bones of drowned water buffalo gleamed as white as the storks in the tall grass, and twice we saw human remains on the riverbank.

At noon, we reached the first village, at the bend of a stream. Dozens of villagers gathered at the little jetty, the women and girls wearing on their cheeks and foreheads *thanaka*—a yellow powder that is both a sunscreen and a cosmetic. As we disembarked, a village leader with a megaphone called men and boys to come offload sixty-four bags of rice. Almost two hundred villagers had died. Most of the fourteen hundred survivors were living in makeshift hovels, with families doubled up.

Hnin Se led the way along a path to the monastery, a collapsed ruin of century-and-a-half-old timber. The abbot received us in his pagoda. This was how the supplies were distributed—not through the local authorities, whom no one trusted, but through the monks. The government's contribution to the village thus far consisted of thirty-five blankets, fifteen bags of rice, and five tarps. Here and throughout the delta, the private effort was keeping people fed.

We sat on the floor of the monks' quarters and were given a lunch that seemed, in these circumstances, much too grand. One of the women who served us was a thirty-year-old whose house had been out in the fields, and so she and her family had been mercilessly exposed when the wall of water came. She had clung to a tree for a day and a night while, one after another, her husband and four of her children were carried away. A two-year-old daughter who had been staying with the woman's sister was all that was left of her family. "We didn't suffer alone," she said. "All of us, together, suffered. That's how we can survive."

By the time we returned to the pagoda, the rain was coming down in torrents. The world beyond the village had disappeared. Hnin Se had told me that, through her relief work in the delta, she had learned how few of her countrymen knew that they had any rights, even the right to complain. The Burmese people were even further from being free than she had imagined. But at least one thing was achieved. Beyond Rangoon, the violence of the September events had been only a rumor among the vast numbers of poor people; the criminal aftermath of the cyclone was something that they saw for themselves. "When I was younger, I hoped and waited for outside help to come to our country and liberate it," she said. "Now I realize that we have to rely on ourselves."

A crowd of women and children had gathered outside the pagoda, clutching plastic bags. Two men in Hnin Se's group opened the sacks of rice and poured their contents onto a sheltered walkway outside the pagoda, making a great white mound. A young monk stood with a megaphone and called out the name of each of the three hundred and eighty-five surviving families. There were far too many people to take cover beneath the shelter, and the villagers stood in the rain, shivering under umbrellas, pieces of plastic, and straw hats, waiting for their turn to step forward and receive three scoops of rice and a piece of clothing from Hnin Se. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

George Packer's blog, Interesting Times.

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

A GREENWICH OF THE MIND

Old money and new, in the age of foreclosure.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

In the town of Greenwich, Connecticut, it is illegal for a real-estate agent to post a "For Sale" sign in front of a house or a tract of land. For many years, such an ordinance was unnecessary; those who needed to know knew, and those who did not did not. But in the nineteen-eighties, with the arrival in town of national real-estate firms, "For Sale" signs started sprouting up, cluttering the roadways with middleman names and numbers. Many residents found the signs unsightly and crass; some home-town agents, keen to preserve the relationship between their local knowledge and their market share, agreed. The signs' most persistent opponent was a satellite-television mogul named Rene Anselmo, who lived in a mansion modelled on the Petit Trianon, at Versailles. Patrolling his street in a Bentley convertible, Anselmo uprooted any "For Sale" signs he could find and piled them in the Bentley's back seat. One day, the police arrested him for spray-painting over a Realtor's sign near his house. After admitting that he had done this to eight or nine other signs, and remarking that he wished he'd used a chain saw, he became a kind of folk hero, the John Brown of real-estate signage. In time, the town came around and passed a law. It has never been tested in court.

The absence of such signage has been a blessing in recent months, as the town's brokers and homeowners have sought to maintain, in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, that they are immune, more or less, to the ravages of the credit crisis. On its own, the subprime-mortgage fiasco would not much affect home prices in Greenwich, a place more prime than sub, but it has reverberated through the financial system, costing many residents, actual or aspiring, their jobs or credit lines. If brokers' signs were allowed, the town might look, from the right distance, like a giant and very expensive tag sale, and the sudden conspicuousness of so much supply, in a time of slackening demand, might shatter a range of illusions best epitomized by the risible listing prices. Generally, people are almost as protective of their property values as they are of their children, and will be as doting in their appraisals of both.

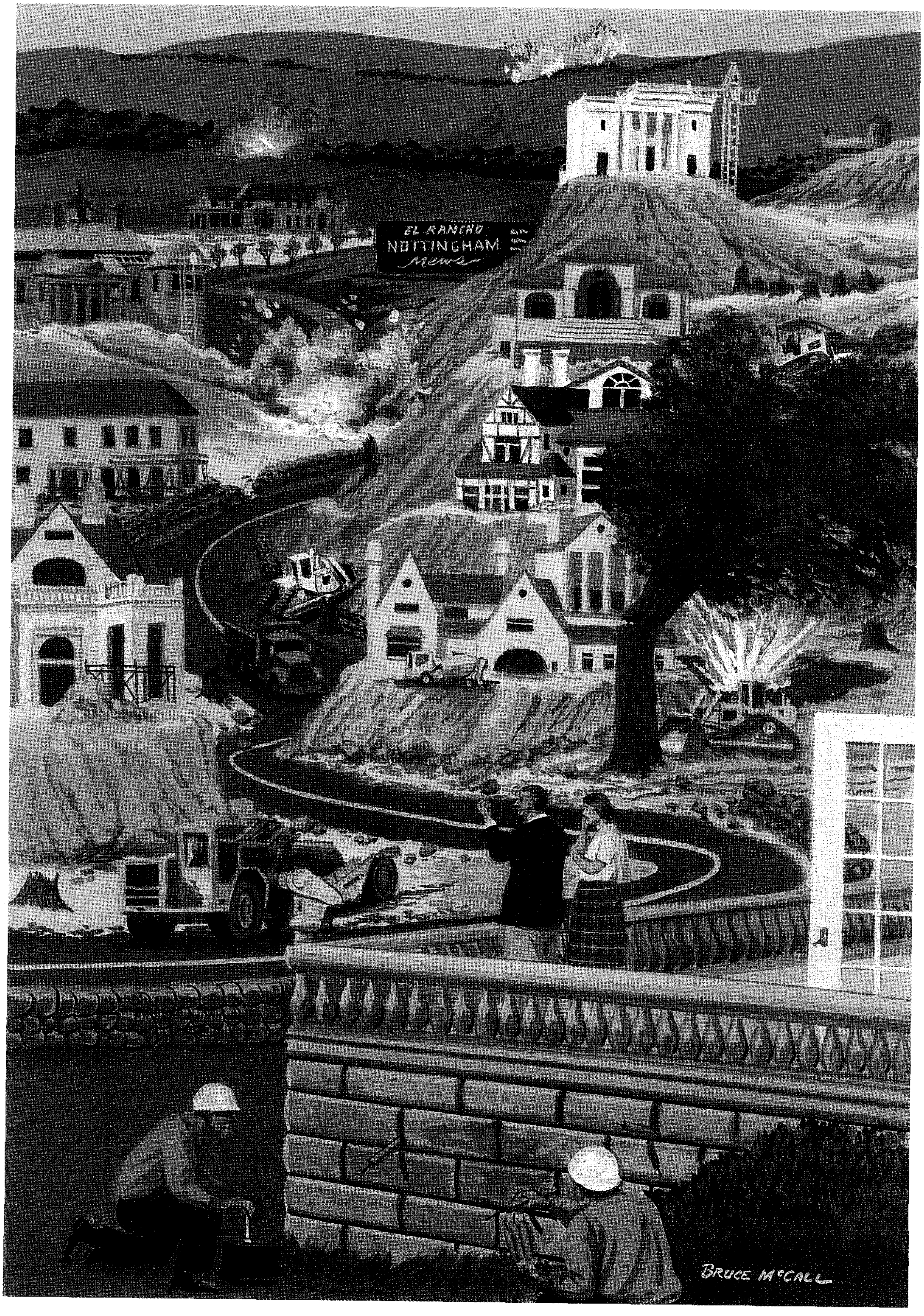
We're in a season of white elephants, of projects commenced in good times now languishing in bad. The sight of a stalled construction project or half-empty development touches off, even in the most disinterested passerby, a kind of queasy delectation. Deep-seated thrift craves vindication, just as envy wishes for comeuppance, but even the most pious strain admits a twinge of fear in the face of vacancy and failure. When others are going under, you could go under, too. An unwanted house, no matter how hideous, is a little sad, like an empty restaurant or a child left out of a game.

North of the Merritt Parkway, Round Hill Road, one of four arteries that run up from central Greenwich to the New York State line, enters what is called backcountry Greenwich, the precinct of the old country estates, now mostly gone or diminished. Still, it is a neighborhood of stately houses, vast fields, big oaks, and stone walls. Not far along, you come to Mooreland Road, which passes through what used to be a hundred-and-sixty-eight-acre farm belonging to the industrialist Charles A. Moore (starting in the nineteen-twenties, Scottish hands in his employ staged annual Highland Games there) and near the childhood home of the actress Glenn Close (a Moore descendant and twelfth-generation Greenwicher). It ends in a cul-de-sac, at the head of which is a large new faux-classical house belonging to a hedge-fund manager named Julius Gaudio, who once spent seven hundred and eighty thousand dollars at a charity auction on two packages, for himself and his wife, featuring a round of golf with Bill Clinton and a pair of Manolo Blahniks, and whose clutch-burning attempts to gun his Ferrari up his steep driveway greatly amused the longtime Moorelanders next door.

Before you get there, you come upon Langhorne Lane. Make a left. It's woodsy around here, but beyond a bend the land opens up, revealing an enormous, mostly finished mansion, in a moonscape of cleared timber and blasted rock on one side, and new sod and blacktop on the other. Viewed from the road, through a chain-link fence, it looks like several houses mashed together—a mutant rising from the rubble. The house, in a style that has been called "stockbroker Georgian," is constructed primarily of stone, excavated on the site and hand-cut, and has thirty-five thousand square feet of floor space, if you include the basement—an underground complex housing a basketball court, a movie theatre, an indoor swimming pool, a gym, a spa, a twenty-thousand-bottle wine cellar, and a wine-tasting room. There are two elevators, seven chimneys, garages with room for ten cars. Although the house stands on a nine-acre lot, it seems lopsidedly close to the road.

The house is a spec house—that is, one built with no particular owner in mind. It is the biggest and most expensive of eight such houses that a local real-estate firm called Antares Investment Partners had planned to build in the Greenwich backcountry—"one of the great mansions of Greenwich's 300-year-old history," as Antares put it in an offering memo to potential investors. It is called the Lake Carrington Estate. James Cabrera and Joseph Beninati, the founders and principals of Antares, live next door to Lake Carrington. In 2002, they bought an eighteen-acre property

The town is more ephemeral than it appears, and an influx of hedge-fund wealth spurred a speculative-construction boom.



EL RANCHO
NOTTINGHAM
Mews
BRUCE McCALL

BRUCE McCALL

that consisted of four lots. On one Cabrera built a traditional American shingle-style mansion; on another Beninati built an Italianate mansion called Villa Leoncelli. The other two lots became the Lake Carrington site, named for a grain magnate who used to have an estate nearby (and in whose pond a banker's teen-age son drowned a hundred years ago). The lake itself—small and man-made—was previously called Carrington Pond.

In recent years in Greenwich, as elsewhere, many developers have made a great deal of money buying up empty lots or teardowns and building enormous speculative ready-to-occupy mansions. You see them everywhere, a proliferating clan of insta-mini-giganto luxury houses, modest at ten to fifteen million dollars apiece. Their banal extravagance both mitigates and exacerbates what people either too rich or too poor to live in such houses would consider their tackiness.

Lake Carrington is enormous and speculative but not quite occupant-ready. It was framed out and drywalled but otherwise unfinished: no bathroom or kitchen fixtures, no moldings. The floors are plywood. It is a husk. To move in, a buyer would need to put in an additional five to fifteen million dollars' worth of work. The developers' name for this situation was "couture-ready," the stated theory being that the buyers, whoever they might be, would want to customize the guts, but not the shell, to their taste.

Another way of looking at Lake Carrington was that it was a Potemkin manor, a movie set, not as much a dream house as a house in a dream. The developers, in a booklet promoting the property, which was known around their office as "the Bible," had described it as "Gatsby-esque," inadvertently summoning up the pretense and the tragedy, rather than the grandeur, of West Egg. The Bible featured stock photographs of polo players, vintage-car grilles, little girls blowing cattails: a Greenwich of the mind. The house was, in one sense, an entirely superficial confection of Greenwichness, and, in another, a canny apotheosis of it. Lake Carrington went on the market in April, 2007, listed at twenty-eight million dollars.

People like to drive around and look at nice houses. They want to know who lives in them, what the owners did to afford them, as well as who used to live in them, and why they no longer do. Houses are projections of taste and means, or the lack of them, and signify fortunes made and lost—the ebb and flow of capital from generation to generation, place to place, line to line. Each cycle of ownership is a cautionary tale—dinner-table mythology.

And each season seems to bring a new saga of excess. Over the past fifteen years or so, Greenwich has effectively become the capital of the hedge-fund world. Firms large and small have settled there, as have their employees, many of them, thanks to their lucrative fee structure, earners of tens or hundreds of millions of dollars a year. That kind of money can change a place, even one as accustomed to big wealth as Greenwich. The town experienced a frenzy of buying, selling, subdividing, demolishing, constructing, renovating, and recriminating that altered its landscape and reputation, if not quite its self-image. There were the notorious cases: the waterfront Monticello-style mansion built for the fund manager Paul Tudor Jones II, which upstaged the old yacht club next door; the fund manager Joseph Jacobs's attempt to build a more-than-thirty-thousand-square-foot backcountry house, which, in the face of community opposition and media derision, he ultimately abandoned; and then, last spring, the failed effort by a Russian named Valery Kogan, an air-cargo oligarch, to demolish a twenty-thousand-square-foot mansion and erect in its place a fifty-four-thousand-square-foot (and twenty-six-toileted) "palace on a postage stamp," as an outraged neighbor called it.

The outrage is perennial. The town's vestigial claim to dignity and discretion—rooted as much in furtive fortune preservation as in any kind of righteous Yankee providence—is at odds with its feverish wealth, past and present. The gigantic new mansions, with their twenty-five-car garages and their private skating rinks, aren't so different from the heavily staffed estates of a hundred years ago, with their stables and arboretums. Vast new wealth will usually find a way to express itself, and what it lacks in imagination it makes up for in moxie. Old money was new once, and usually not that long ago, and, whether you earned it by selling mattresses or by securitizing loans to the mattress sellers or by shorting those debt securities, the more you have, the more you have.

"That's my father. He's the understudy for my mother."

How did Greenwich become Greenwich? It is no more pleasant or beautiful, on its own, than any number of places within a similar distance to Manhattan. The breezes are no sweeter. It contains less rust than some neighboring towns; industry, in the twentieth century anyway, clustered around the river mouths up and down the coast, in Stamford and Norwalk, and in Port Chester, New York. It has lovely coves and handsome upland pastures, big old beeches and appealing little ponds, but so do a lot of places. A hundred years ago, town boosters bragged of an absence of mosquitoes and malaria. Now they say that there are good schools, both public and private, a low crime rate (aside from the occasional home invasion or society murder), and great country clubs, public beaches, and parks. It's also a bit of a tax haven. Until 1991, Connecticut had no state tax on income (not including capital gains); property taxes, too, are generally lower there than in Westchester County. And Greenwich is the closest bit of Connecticut to New York City.

Greenwich is a big town, with a population of sixty-two thousand. It's more diverse than you might think, although it is true that for many years real-estate agents, admissions directors, club committee members, and other town leaders quietly enforced a policy of no Jews (more or less), and the 2000 census found that less than two per cent of its residents were black. For decades, there have been various ethnic neighborhoods situated according to their nineteenth-century industrial designations. These days, there are housing projects, working-class apartments, greasy depots, office parks, an industrial bakery, a brownfield site. But Greenwich has as high and showy a concentration of wealth as any like-sized town. In median family income—a hundred and fifty-seven thousand dollars a year—it ranks below its neighbors New Canaan, Westport, and Darien (which is known to nitpicking Greenwichers as "Aryan Darien"), but those are smaller and more purely domestic. And there aren't any twenty-eight-million-dollar spec mansions in Darien.

Size and speculation are not new to Greenwich. Some of the most exclusive sections, such as Belle Haven and Khakum Wood, started out as planned developments—spec houses, of a kind. In 1925, two sons of John Henry Twachtman, the Impressionist, purchased seventy-seven acres from William Rockefeller, near Round Hill Road, cut the land into parcels, and built more than two dozen houses, at least one of them on spec, in a variety of architectural styles. The development wasn't exactly Levittown, but it attracted a new class of people. "They did sell to a Jewish couple," Anne Young, the curator of archives at Greenwich's Historical Society, told me. In time, the Twachtman houses, owing in part to the affluence of their residents, became an exclusive and coveted neighborhood.

With wealth came prestige, which in turn attracted more wealth, creating a constant recirculation of capital and status. If New York City is the heart of the marketplace, Greenwich is the liver, where toxins are processed and rich bits collect. Or it is like the tidal marshes that ring its bays, filtering out nutrients and waste, and the mossbunker that come in on the tide, languidly schooling on the surface—those are the citizens of Greenwich. Every now and then, the bluefish—newcomers? bankruptcy?—strike from below, and the bunker boil up, and the water gets bloody. Anne Young described to me how the town's mores had changed, with the arrival of "people who have achieved financial success." She said, recalling a line from somewhere, "Remember, 'stranger' rhymes with 'danger.'" That may be so, but permanence is not an attribute of American capitalism, or of Greenwich.

It can pay to leave. George W. Bush has effectively renounced his Greenwich provenance, although not its perquisites, in order to distance himself from its élitist implications. He was born into a family of Yale and Greenwich men connected, by business, marriage, and sensibility, to some of the lions of the Eastern establishment—Harrimans, Rockefellers. His grandfather Prescott Bush married well and came to Greenwich before joining the firm that would become Brown Brothers Harriman. To sustain the dynasty, however, the next generations had to repudiate their Greenwichness, or pretend to. They had to convert the currency into something else, or at least refinance it.

Greenwich is a much more ephemeral place than it would appear. In addition to the three "D"s of real estate—death, divorce, diapers—you get a few others, such as distress and dislocation. The proximity of corporate headquarters in New York and its suburbs made Greenwich a way station for transient businessmen pulling short stints on the corporate-transfer wheel. (In the sixties, people liked to say that I.B.M., headquartered just over the state line, stood for "I'm Being Moved.") That era of the so-called upper middle class—law-firm salaries, beat-up station wagons, unironic golf—gave way to the guiltless acquiring and flaunting of the Wall Street boom, and to a restlessness that stimulated turnover of a different kind.

This has been good for the real-estate business, and for companies like Antares, the Lake Carrington developer. Greenwich's cachet is the brokers' ace, and they like to conjure it by telling stories about the properties they are selling. One of the reasons that the Helmsley estate, encompassing a ninety-year-old house on forty acres on Round Hill Road, is listed at a hundred and twenty-five million dollars is that it has such a rich past, albeit one full of misery and ruin—suicide, adultery, fraud, debt, Leona.

Anne Young, at the Historical Society, says that she often gets calls from brokers who are listing spec houses. "They ask me, 'What can you tell me about this part of town?' They want to know so they can use the history to sell the property. So in a sense even these new houses need a story."

A year ago, the *Post* ran a story ("SPENDING HIS A-WAD") about Alex Rodriguez, or A-Rod, the Yankees star, who was to be a free agent at the end of the season, and whose intentions—stay or go—had become the object of great speculation in the local media. The news in the story was that A-Rod had been house-hunting in Greenwich, which would suggest an inclination to re-sign with the Yankees. The house he was supposedly interested in was Lake Carrington. A photographer for the *Post* got an aerial shot.

It didn't matter that Rodriguez had not actually looked at Lake Carrington—that, according to the *Post*, he and his wife had simply eaten at Polpo, a Greenwich restaurant partly owned by Antares, with a real-estate agent named Lynn Cone, the wife of the retired Mets and Yankees pitcher David Cone, and that she had apparently gone to a Lake Carrington open house. Somehow, a possible celebrity sighting at Polpo morphed into an A-Rod scoop, and into free advertising for an unsold spec house. Antares also got, in passing, some advertising for itself.

By the time Jim Cabrera and Joe Beninati started building Lake Carrington, Antares had become well known around Greenwich as an aggressive purchaser, developer, and marketer of commercial property. Beninati and Cabrera, best friends from Choate, a prep school in central Connecticut, founded the firm in 1996, when they were thirty-one. By the summer of 2007, they were managing a portfolio of real estate in and around Greenwich that they valued at six billion dollars, although figuring out what's worth what, to say nothing of who owns what, can get very complicated, and has got only more so in the past year. Antares isn't a hedge fund, but it has such funds as clients and tenants, and in many ways it is structured as an asset manager; it is a real-estate development and private-equity firm that, in the main, deploys other people's money.

Beninati, the more adept of the two at raising capital, was born in the Bronx. His father worked in the photo-processing lab at the *Saturday Evening Post* before opening his own lab. When Beninati was fourteen, his family moved to the then middle-class town of Armonk, New York, just over the state line from Greenwich. After high school, where he excelled at football, he spent a year at Choate as a postgraduate—an athletic recruit preparing for college. Cabrera, who was also spending a postgraduate year at Choate, grew up in Old Greenwich; his father was the president of an outplacement counselling firm. Though they went to different colleges—Beninati to Middlebury, Cabrera to Duke—they stayed close, and when Beninati became the chief financial officer of Telos, a defense contractor, Cabrera, a regional president of a national brokerage, handled all of Telos's real-estate work.

Antares began as a real-estate brokerage when Beninati and Cabrera found new headquarters for Paul Tudor Jones's Tudor Investment on Steamboat Road. Jones is often spoken of as a Greenwich pioneer, the first big hedge-fund manager to set up both house and shop there. (Cabrera was the one with the real-estate background and the local contacts.) Cabrera and Beninati also helped him buy Soundview Farms, across the town line, in Stamford, the headquarters of the commodities trader Thomas O'Malley, for whom Cabrera had caddied as a kid. Before Jones moved in, however, he changed his mind. So Cabrera and Beninati advised him on buying the headquarters of Tenneco, formerly the Henry Luce estate, and were involved in the sale of Soundview first to PanAmSat, Rene Anselmo's company, and then of a portion of it, soon thereafter, to S.A.C. Capital Advisors, Steven A. Cohen's sixteen-billion-dollar hedge fund. Cohen turned Soundview into one of the world's most sophisticated trading floors. Cabrera and Beninati coördinated the development and managed the property.

On several occasions, I heard people in town refer to Beninati and Cabrera as "the boys," a moniker that conveyed varying degrees of collaboration, astonishment, and condescension. In the press and in pitches to investors, the boys positioned themselves as hedge-fund Pied Pipers. Capitalizing on this influx of what they and others in town generally called "the hedge-fund guys," Beninati and Cabrera, with various lenders and equity partners, bought a number of commercial buildings in Greenwich and Stamford and converted them into space fit for the kind of tenants who would be willing to pay rents more suited to midtown Manhattan than to coastal Connecticut. Antares bought into the group that had transformed the old Steamboat, a run-down motel on the harbor, into the Delamar, a swanky hotel for the bankers and salesmen who were now compelled to come to Greenwich to court the hedge-fund guys. Beninati and Cabrera were also part owners of hedge-fund-guy restaurants: L'Escale, at the Delamar, and Polpo.

For Antares, the hedge-fund guys were a strategy and a shtick. Two years ago, Beninati and Cabrera hired a firm called Shift Control Media to create "advergames"—Internet video games that would serve as advertisements for their properties and services. One, a twist on the old arcade game Frogger, was called Hedger. The premise was that you—the game player, the future Antares tenant, the hedge-fund titan—have just made a killing and are wending your way triumphantly from your offices near the Greenwich waterfront to the Delamar, in order to board the Louis XVI, your sixty-five-foot yacht. If you don't maneuver nimbly through Greenwich traffic, you get squashed—preparation, perhaps, for the real-life hostilities of the Whole Foods parking lot, a notorious battleground of eight-cylinder automobiles piloted with near-comical rage by over-caffeinated women and overcompensated men. If money buys anything here, it's impatience.

It was this constituency—the one that would be seduced rather than repelled by this vision of Greenwich—that Beninati and Cabrera had in mind when they bought twenty-six back-country acres in 2004 and began building houses on them, under the aegis of a limited-liability corporation, Antares Mansions. The company raised $12.9 million from investors and borrowed twenty-seven million dollars from two banks. Antares put in the land, which it valued at $2.9 million. In the offering, Antares, citing "substantial velocity in the Greenwich ultra luxury market," asserted that, even if it sold the houses at thirty per cent less per square foot than the average selling price for luxury homes in the area at the time, investors would break even. The velocity made this supposedly worst-case scenario seem unlikely. (Antares was not alone in making such assumptions; a nation of homebuyers and loan officers did the same.) The plan was to give investors a return of twenty per cent.

HERE THE BIRDS' JOURNEY ENDS

Here the birds' journey ends, our journey, the journey of words,
and after us there will be a horizon for the new birds.
We are the ones who forge the sky's copper, the sky that will carve roads
after us and make amends with our names above the distant cloud slopes.
Soon we will descend the widow's descent in the memory fields
and raise our tent to the final winds: blow, for the poem to live, and blow
on the poem's road. After us, the plants will grow and grow
over roads only we have walked and our obstinate steps inaugurated.
And we will etch on the final rocks, "Long live life, long live life,"
and fall into ourselves. And after us there'll be a horizon for the new birds.

—*Mahmoud Darwish* (*1941-2008*)
(*Translated, from the Arabic, by Fady Joudah.*)

In addition to the Lake Carrington site, there were seventeen acres off North Street, which Antares would develop into Taconic Estates. Beninati, in interviews, likened them to the giant cottages of Newport, Rhode Island, but with modern technology and luxury amenities. "We want each home to be a hard place to leave," he said.

One rationale for the spec mansion is that the developer, rather than the eventual homeowner, endures the trial of pushing inevitably controversial plans through the arduous approval process. The developer, theoretically, has the expertise, and the capacity for heedlessness. Antares pressed this advantage. Neighbors complained of illegal dynamiting, excessive tree felling, the impact on wetlands. Later, Antares asked for permission to cut down a copse of trees that belonged to the town; the town said no. One day, the neighbors discovered that the trees were gone. They accused Antares of surreptitiously getting rid of them. Antares responded that the neighbors must have cut them, to make Antares look bad. (Beninati said that new bushes and trees have now been planted on the site; he also denied that there had been any illegal dynamiting.)

Before Lake Carrington came on the market, in April, 2007, Beninati told the New York *Sun*, "There's always a market for van Goghs, and there's always a market for backcountry mansions in Greenwich. Markets are pretty much irrelevant here. It just depends which group of guys in the world are on top. So it might be the Russian oil barons, the hedge fund guys, or the private equity guys today. In the next few years it might be the venture capitalists, the tech guys, and the Japanese guys. It is just a rotation of who has the millions and millions."

One day late in the spring, I had lunch at L'Escale with Charles Mallory, one of the owners of the Delamar. He came up with the name, as a tribute to Joseph DeLamar, a mining magnate who built one of the largest mansions of the Gatsby era, on Long Island's North Shore, across the Sound. L'Escale seeks to summon the Côte d'Azur, by way of Miami and Glen Cove.

It was a humid, glary tristate-area afternoon, and we ate outside, on a terrace, within view of the ferry to Great Captain Island, which, until recently, had been open to town residents only. Mallory, who runs a ship-brokerage business, grew up in Manhattan and moved to Greenwich in 1991, but his roots there reach back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when his forebears had an estate on Byram Shore Road. I had come across a *Times* clip from 1905 that described an incident during a "card party" there, in which a gas tank exploded, killing a gardener. The host, Charles H. Mallory, a shipping magnate, ordered the undertaker to refrain from removing the gardener's corpse until the party was over. As the *Times* reported, "While his body lay on the lawn a hundred feet from the house the guests continued their merriment, not having been informed of the fatality."

Mallory hadn't heard this particular family tale. He told me that two-thirds of the estate had been sold off after the Second World War and subdivided. The remaining third, maintained by a cousin, had been sold several years ago. "It's easy to say new wealth has changed Greenwich for the worse," he said. "But I would argue, and this is even coming from a Waspy perspective, that it's a more diverse and fascinating community than it was. It's gotten better, even if it's more competitive and more expensive."

Mallory had on a pink and white checked shirt, pleated white linen pants, and webbed loafers. He was drinking rosé. "This is the new Greenwich," he said, indicating a table nearby of about a dozen women in their forties and fifties. "This is a very indicative get-together: an enormously attractive group of females, who are from, what, probably Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina. That's the way it is here now. A very international community. There are a lot of Russians." Later, Mallory mentioned that the trompe-l'oeils inside the hotel had been painted by a local artist named Debra Ryan, who was the girlfriend of Samuel Israel III, the convicted hedge-fund swindler. The week before, while he was supposed to be driving himself to prison, Israel had faked his own suicide, abandoning his car on the Bear Mountain Bridge with a message reading "Suicide is painless." Ryan, who allegedly helped him get away, was arrested soon thereafter.

Another woman walked in. "Here's a friend!" Mallory said. "She's the wife of a shipping magnate. Very attractive." The woman, voluble and bare-shouldered, came over to say hello and explained that she was here with her twelve-year-old daughter and the daughter's boyfriend. There he was, a sullen-looking kid with long hair and big sneakers.

Mallory didn't want to talk much about Beninati and Cabrera. "I have to be careful," he said. "They're still part-

FARLEY KATZ

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

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ners of mine in this place." He added, "It's been useful for them to have a Trump-like persona in this market, but then it's about execution and market timing."

I first went to see Beninati last winter at Antares's office, on an old industrial peninsula in the city of Stamford. The South End, as the neighborhood was called, had once been home to Pitney Bowes and Yale & Towne, and was now a Rust Belt-ish conglomeration of abandoned industrial space and hard-luck housing, with some new office developments scattered about, many of them now owned by Antares. Beninati's office looked out in the opposite direction, over parts of Long Island Sound.

Beninati, who is forty-four, has long, slicked-back, gray-streaked dark hair and favors a showily preppy style of dress that would seem self-mocking on an editor or an adman. That afternoon, he had on orange chinos and a white sweater vest over a candy-striped Oxford shirt with the top two buttons undone. The intonation of his voice rose frequently at the end of his sentences. On a dry board, he drew a pyramid. At the top were the hedge funds and private-equity funds—S.A.C. Capital Advisors, Tudor Investment. Below were the investment banks and commercial banks, such as U.B.S. and the Royal Bank of Scotland, that had moved their trading operations to Fairfield County in part to be near them. The base of the pyramid comprised the lawyers, accountants, insurers, and others who minister to the upper layers. "It has really created a full business ecosystem up here," he said. I gathered that Beninati saw Antares as belonging to both the peak and the base—and that this pyramid did not take into account the gardeners, cops, teachers, storekeepers, lifeguards, caddies, mechanics, and massage therapists who made the town a town. They weren't Antares tenants.

In 2006, Antares had paid two hundred and twenty-three million dollars for a pair of apartment complexes in the Byram section of Greenwich, a formerly working-class neighborhood whose name, the lore has it, derives from "Buy rum." Antares planned to convert them into luxury condominiums and to change their names, from Putnam Green and Weaver's Hill to Greenwich Oaks and Greenwich Place. It was one of the biggest real-estate deals in Connecticut history, and it was a dud.

Antares, in effect, would be pricing out existing tenants, most of them elderly. This led to lawsuits, which slowed renovations and attracted opprobrium in the press. Antares had to charge prohibitively high prices to recoup its investment. Buyers were scarce. There was velocity in the market, but in the wrong direction. In the summer of 2007, Antares stopped construction work, amid a bout of lawsuits from contractors seeking back pay.

Lehman Brothers had loaned the Antares project about three hundred million dollars, and by the end of the year foreclosure proceedings seemed possible—a complicated business, because by this point Antares had replaced approximately forty million dollars of its original financing with funds from a Kuwaiti investor. The deal had to be compliant with Sharia, or Islamic law. Sharia forbids interest, so it was structured as a lease arrangement, with Antares's name still on the deed. With Lehman as a partner, a group led by an Atlanta-based firm, Radco, assumed control of the complexes.

The Putnam Green venture was, in many ways, a microcosm of the entire American banking meltdown: easy credit, blind optimism, heavy leverage, murky chain of custody, poor execution, infusion of foreign capital, market reversal, bust, more murkiness. Still, people in town wondered how it was possible for the boys, who had made so much of their local roots, to have made such a bad bet. "They're supposedly from here," Henry Pascarella, a prominent real-estate lawyer in town, who was part of a group of investors who looked at Putnam Green, told me. "They should've known better."

Beninati wouldn't talk about the Putnam Green proceedings, citing confidentiality agreements with Lehman (which also declined to comment). Now he was thinking ahead, or at least trying to get me to. He mentioned that a subsidiary of a fund that managed a portion of the Rockefeller family fortune had just signed a lease to move into an Antares building, and said, "It's amazing. Something like that won't garner any notice, but you build a spec house in Greenwich and suddenly everyone wants to write about you." Despite a flurry of newspaper stories, Antares had built only two houses at Taconic Estates, and had sold just one of them, for $10.75 million.

Lake Carrington still hadn't sold. Backcountry mansions, apparently, were not van Goghs.

Greenwich's spec-house crackerjack may be Mark Mariani, who, in the last fifteen years, has built dozens of ownerless homes in and around town. He claims to hold the top three spots in the spec-home sales-price rankings; Tommy Hilfiger bought one from him, for eighteen million dollars, in 2005. More than anything, Mariani is fast. It takes him six months or less to build one. Earlier this year, he demolished an old Tudor house on Round Hill Road and replaced it with an eighteen-thousand-square-foot château-style mansion in just eighty days. This was a custom job for Judy Sheindlin—Judge Judy. One day, I stood on Round Hill Road with a real-estate agent and tried, without success, to count the number of workers swarming the grounds, like time-lapse termites in rewind. Mariani told me that he often has more than three or four hundred men on a site. "I'm an animal," he said. "We compress time when we build."

Mariani, who is a longtime friend of Beninati's, did some clearing for Antares at Lake Carrington. He said that the project had presented a series of no-win decisions for Antares: "It's not the right kind of home for that area." Speaking generally, he went on, "Everybody jumped into the real-estate business in Greenwich, thinking there were fortunes to be made. That doesn't mean they know how to build."

Mariani also has a nursery and landscaping business, Mariani Gardens, in Armonk. On the company's Web site he is described as "a sort of latter day Thoreau crossed with an English gardener" who can "create the garden or landscape of your dreams." Mariani says that a client will tell him, "I'm going to give you half a million dollars. I'll be away for three weeks. This is my property. Make it beautiful." When I visited Mariani Gardens, the dream-creation apparatus was in full bloom. Rustling fountains, bird feeders, topiaries, statuary, hydrangeas, boxwoods, fruit trees, fire pits: the rudiments of back-yard make-believe. There were attendants in uniform and New Age music and a café.

Mariani, who is forty-three and is built like a guy who actually uses his basement gym, was dressed in a pastel striped shirt and tan slacks. Like Beninati, he was born in the Bronx and reared in Armonk; in fact, he dated Beninati's sister when they were teenagers. In high school, Mariani borrowed money from Beninati's father to buy a bulldozer and started doing landscaping and construction jobs. "I was making more money than the principal," he told me. College seemed pointless; he worked construction instead. When he was twenty-one, he built his first spec house.

Mariani doesn't feel much remorse for the houses he knocks down. "I don't even walk inside them," he said. "I could care less." His crews do the demolition, the site prep, and the building, including the millwork, masonry, cabinetry, painting, and landscaping. He reuses the materials on site. A rock crusher turns excavated stone into gravel. He doesn't give his houses names.

His model is different from Antares's. "I finance myself," he said. "Banks couldn't get used to my schedule. They told me, 'You build a luxury home faster than most people close on a mortgage.' " Mariani owns two private jets, and houses in Anguilla and Telluride. One afternoon, after visiting a couple of his projects, we wound up at his house, a renovated French manor on Round Hill Road, not far from Lake Carrington. He was about to take his son to a Yankees game, but he had time for a quick tour of the grounds. Out back, a battalion of gardeners was trimming boxwoods that had been sculpted in the shape of musical notes. "It's something Liberace should've done," Mariani said. The pool had rose petals floating in it. Allées led through hedgerows to little cherub statues, corresponding to his wife and two children, and then farther on to an orchard full of plums, figs, strawberries, olives, and pears. Inside, he showed me his basketball court and his movie theatre, where he urged me to sit in one of the plush velvet seats. He turned out the lights and put on a DVD of a Carlos Santana concert. "You like Santana?" Mariani said. "I'm so glad he finally got noticed."

After a few numbers—wind chimes, showgirls, Dave Matthews—I found myself wondering what a guest is supposed to do or say, in the din of a darkened Greenwich home-screening room, to convey that he is suitably impressed.

To a certain extent, Greenwich, as a state of mind and as a vendible commodity, is a self-perpetuating contrivance, consisting of some amalgam of exclusivity and display. It may be that

PHONETIC MAN
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the version of it that Cabrera and Beninati tried to bottle at Lake Carrington was off. Still, Lake Carrington's difficulties may have been not so much aesthetic or conceptual as they were financial. Antares had solicited a study from Cushman & Wakefield, a real-estate services firm, which recommended that the mansion sites be developed to the "highest density possible." In other words, to do well, go huge. The plans expanded, which required more money. Antares Mansions raised an additional twenty-five million dollars of so-called "mezzanine" debt (debt that, in order of eventual repayment, ranks below senior debt but above equity). The mezzanine lender was, in fact, Antares (the parent company). Meanwhile, NorthStar S.I.C. Holding, a joint venture involving a New Mexico state fund, had acquired an interest in Antares.

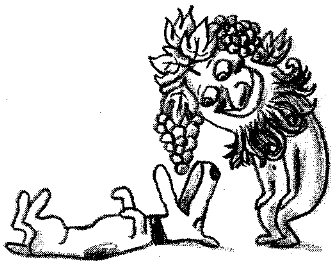
Antares Mansions' original debts matured. Having failed to complete or sell its mansions in time, it entered default on those initial bank loans, incurring fees and fines, and punitive interest payments of up to twenty-five per cent. This increased the already odious costs of carrying the inventory of unsold houses and land, which forced the company to sell properties off at lower prices. The second Taconic mansion went for just $6.6 million, a few million less than Cabrera and Beninati hoped, and the remaining parcels—five empty lots—for nine million dollars. This paid down some of the debt but not all of it. In May, Cabrera invited the mansion investors to a meeting at the Delamar and, according to people who were there, told them that essentially their money was gone. Still, he proposed a plan to get back a small portion of it.

In July, some of the original equity investors in the mansions sued Antares. The suit, filed in Connecticut, asked the court to force Antares to pay them back before paying off other debt interests. (Antares, having provided the mezzanine loan, was basically paying itself back before the investors.) Antares countersued in New York, claiming that the investors' insistence on being paid back before any new lender had scotched Antares's ability to get another loan, which had caused it to default on the original loans, which in turn had undermined its ability to build and sell the houses.

Last week, the parties agreed, in principle, to settle both lawsuits. Under the settlement terms, the investors would recover some of the capital they had put into the mansions. One consequence was that Antares could now move ahead with the sale of its last remaining piece of mansion inventory, the Lake Carrington house. A buyer had come forward, Beninati said—"a local hedge-fund guy with a construction partner. The buyer's going to finish it and may live in it." There was a signed contract. The sale price was $13.75 million, about half its original list price.

"For Sale" signs may be illegal in Greenwich, but bank-foreclosure signs aren't, perhaps because they are so rare. In late May, a crude notice, poster-size and dense with type, appeared in the driveway of a house on Round Hill Road, just across the street from the turnoff onto Mooreland, announcing a foreclosure auction. The property, a thirty-year-old six-bedroom contemporary farmhouse on a steeply sloping 7.3-acre lot, had been appraised at $3.9 million. (A second appraisal came in slightly higher.) The owner was a long-time homebuilder who had suffered losses on a recent development project, and had defaulted on a mortgage on the house, which he'd built himself. His wife, a real-estate agent, had been trying to sell it for more than a year. It had been on the cover of the *Times'* "Homes" real-estate advertising supplement in October, listed at $5.295 million.

The foreclosure auction was scheduled to take place at noon on a Saturday at the end of June, after a two-hour inspection period. Allan Cramer, the lawyer who had been assigned by the court to run the auction, told me that he expected it to sell for more than $3.9 million, likely to a builder looking for a teardown. Each bidder would have to present a bank check for three hundred and ninety thousand dollars—ten per cent of the initial appraisal price. Cramer noted, a few days before the auction, that about twenty people (Beninati among them) were interested in bidding, and that several of them were Russians. Certainly, the millions had rotated the Russians' way, and in the last year they'd come to town looking to rotate a fraction of it back.



Oddly, the owner, an older, courtly gentleman, was present. He greeted visitors at the front door and showed them around, as though he'd invited them over for tea. The house was strewn with the leavings of a tag sale earlier in the week: twentieth-century obsolescence on the block—a silver tea service in the corner of an empty living room; cameras and sunglasses on the dining-room table; old skis, golf clubs, and wooden tennis racquets in the basement. The house smelled of mildew, and summoned up the Connecticut suburbs of the "Ice Storm" period, that fond and dreary time of rec rooms, Deep Purple posters, and latchkey afternoons.

As noon approached, there were no Russians. The only prospective bidders were a young couple. A few neighbors had drifted over, out of some kind of parasitically supportive curiosity. At noon, Cramer, the lawyer, announced the bank's offer—$3,905,311.89, or just a smidgen over the original appraisal—and that was that. No one topped it. The bank, Washington Mutual, the nation's largest thrift, which had so many defaults and bad debts on its books that it was in danger of going under, now owned a nice piece of property on Round Hill Road in Greenwich, Connecticut, that no one else seemed to want. The foreclosure sign was gone, but the house, as those in the know would know, was extremely for sale.

I met Beninati again in June, at Polpo. He showed up in a Bentley convertible. Since January, he had been hard to track down. He had spent a total of thirty days in the Middle East that winter and spring, raising money for a new Antares private-equity fund. (There was also a partnership with Goldman Sachs Real Estate, which was invested in Stamford and Greenwich office buildings.) "It's a classic time for overseas investment," he said, which was one way of putting it. The market had turned, and Beninati was already treating his and Cabrera's forays into residential,

"It's been so long—it's like I'm only gay in theory."

• •

as opposed to commercial, real estate as an unfortunate but trifling misadventure—a deviation from their strong suit, and, no matter the outcome, a venture of insufficient scale. Tiger Woods had just won the U.S. Open on one leg, and Beninati said, "It's a good lesson in life: stay focussed." This observation gave him a chance to state, for the record, "We will not be building spec houses. It's a niche business, and it's not our niche."

In early August, Beninati took me on what he called a "windshield tour" of Antares's various projects. The conveyance, this time, was a Range Rover, and the outfit an orange checked sport coat, coral-pink pants, and light-brown suède loafers. The first stop was a four-story building on West Putnam Avenue, in the heart of Greenwich, which had previously been the headquarters of U.S.T., the tobacco company. Antares bought it last year and was converting it into offices for three hedge funds, which were paying around a hundred and fifty dollars a square foot, a Greenwich record. It was fully leased, he said. "This is the year of the distressed guys," Beninati told me, by which he meant the guys who trade in distressed securities, as opposed to, say, guys who are in distress. "Somehow, the top of the pyramid always shows up in Greenwich."

We surveyed a future trading floor—"Rent is as insignificant to these guys as the lunch bill," Beninati said—and then headed up to the roof, from which you could see Manhattan, New Rochelle, Long Island, and sections of Greenwich sloping down to the shore. Beninati pointed out a Trump high-rise going up in Stamford, a brief drive east, and next to it a crane, which he said was Antares's.

The company's Stamford project was by far its most ambitious undertaking to date, and, because of its size, at least as near to the fringes of the Antares niche as the mansions had been. Starting in 2005, in partnership with a real-estate private-equity firm in Philadelphia called Lubert-Adler, Antares had assembled more than a hundred acres in Stamford's South End. It changed the name of the neighborhood to Harbor Point and set out to develop it, over the next five to ten years, at an estimated cost of $4.5 billion, into a complex of apartment and office buildings, with a marina, a school, two hotels, grocery stores—the works. "We're building a city on the water here," Beninati said. Or, as he told the *Wall Street Journal*, "How do you take Greenwich and expand it? Right next door is the Stamford waterfront."

By June, a developer from Norwalk named Carl Kuehner and his firm Building and Land Technology had joined the project. People around town wondered whether Antares had lost control of Harbor Point, but Beninati dismissed this: "Carl's going to lead the vertical development. He's a superstar. It's like trading for a Derek Jeter. We're not about ego." (A spokesman for Lubert-Adler said that the firm would have no comment.)

In real estate, the only thing more important than location is optimism. Rosy projections create a kind of fog that can make it all but impossible to measure the prospects of a project, or of a privately held real-estate firm. There was a sense, among Greenwich real-estate veterans, that Antares's residential stumbles augured poorly for its grander schemes, but Beninati, in the time I spent with him, was more inclined to express relief that the company had made it through a very tough year—tough for everyone and not just for Antares. "This is the second inning of a nine-inning game," he said. He noted, on several occasions, that Antares's total internal rate of return on its various investments over the years was thirty per cent, a self-reported track record that formed the core of his pitch to potential overseas investors in Antares's next fund. The goal was three hundred million dollars. When I asked him how much he'd raised so far, he said, "We'll get to well over five hundred million."

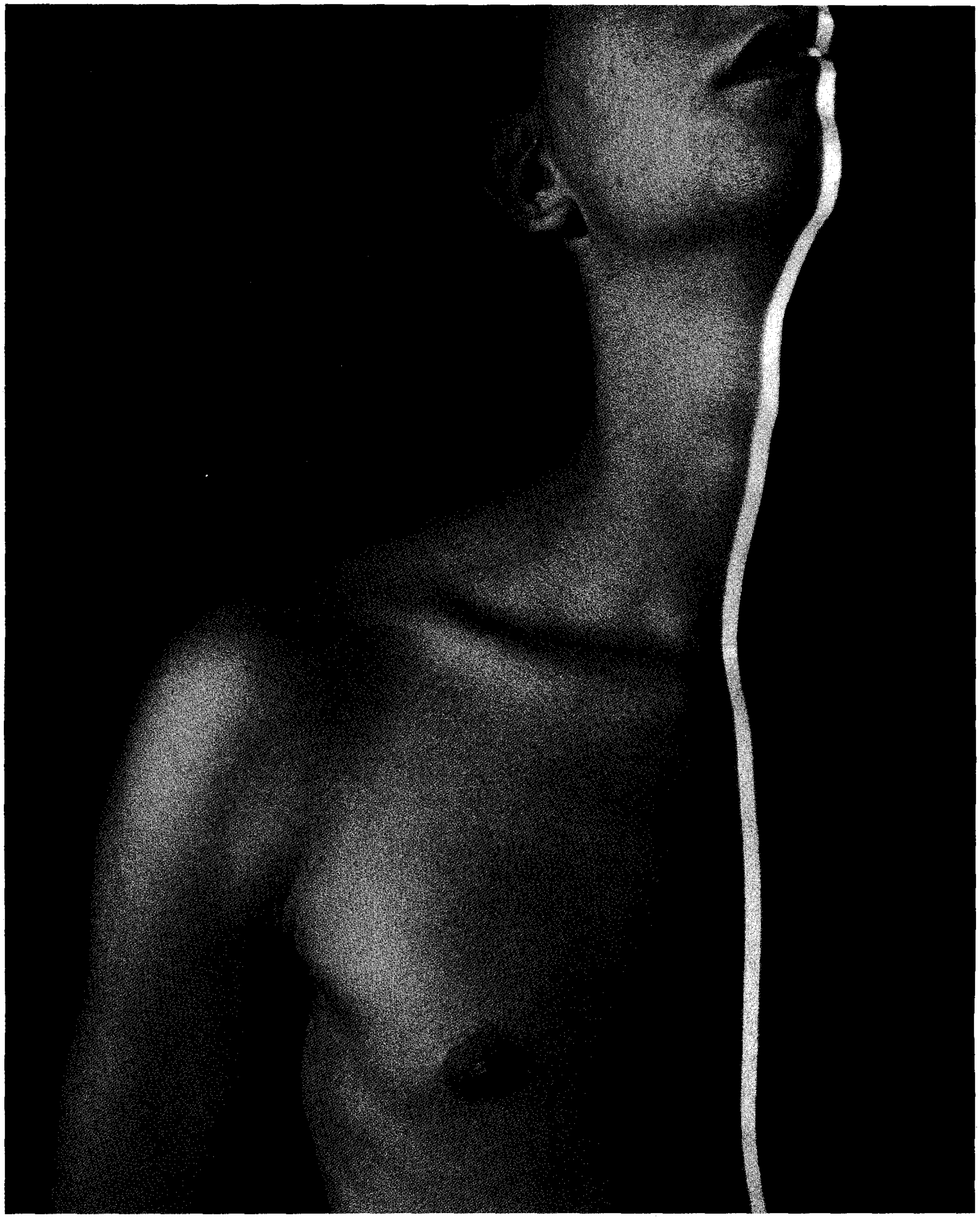
The windshield tour wound its way into backcountry Greenwich. Beninati's radio was tuned to CNBC. The Dow was up strongly, and, the commentator noted, "There's a lot of cash on the sidelines waiting for a theme to develop." Beninati, who the previous week had predicted to me that the bottom was near, sensed vindication. Certainly, if the roadsides, with their impeccably maintained houses and grounds, were sidelines, there was a lot of cash there.

Before long, we reached the Lake Carrington Estate. We went in through one of the garages, and he led me from one giant proto-room to another, conjuring up appliances, materials, and the striations of what Antares had called, in the Lake Carrington Bible, "a life rich with stories and memories." What would this house look like in a hundred years? Through a window in the library, you could see a tiny decrepit log cabin, an old skate hut from the lake's pond days, persisting on the grounds, like a rebuke from a dead relative. ♦

FICTION

AWAKE

BY TOBIAS WOLFF



“Odysseus turned his back on the harbour and followed a rough track leading through the woods and up to the hills toward the place where Athene had told him . . .”

Richard read on for a time. He was restless but tried to take an interest in Odysseus’ journey to the home of his loyal “swineherd”—what a word, what a way to make a living!—who of course doesn’t recognize him, nobody ever recognized anybody in these old books, but offers Odysseus a meal anyway and bangs his ear off with complaints. Now and then Richard glanced over at Ana, asleep beside him. He kept willing her to wake, to turn and open her arms to him—no such luck. Gloomy, impatient, he went back to the Odyssey. Ana had left it on the bedside table, open to this chapter, which Richard found boring and implausible. He leafed ahead to the part where Odysseus strings his bow and slaughters all the suitors, but there was a lot more fancy description and speechifying than he remembered from the version he’d read as a kid. He was supposed to have read it again, a couple years ago, as part of his freshman core at Columbia, but he’d come down with the flu that week.

It was a library book. He studied the withdrawal dates—few of them and far between—then closed it and put it back down.

Ana had only stirred a little when he turned on the lamp. Now he switched it off and plumped his pillow and fooled with the covers, hoping that all this would do the trick, but she slept on, snoring softly, face to the wall. The bed was narrow, and in the dark he became even more aware of the heat from her back and her legs, especially her legs. He touched his knee to the tender crook of hers and she drew away, leaving him jangly and resentful, but conscious also that he had no right to be, that she’d already given herself twice that night and had to get up early with a full day of waitressing ahead of her; he had only one class to attend, in the afternoon. But knowing this did not take the edge off his need—for it felt like need, nothing less—to have her against him again, her open mouth moving on his, her fingers digging into his back.

Jesus! He had to think of something else.

But what? Even thinking of something else, he’d know that he was doing it to distract himself, and that thought would lead right back to this bed, to the weight of Ana beside him, her breath, her heat. Still, if he kept it up long enough maybe he’d fall asleep, or at least be awake and ready when her alarm went off. Not that he’d pressure her. Unless they hurried, which she didn’t like, she’d have to go to work without breakfast or a shower. He’d just give her a look, his special look, and she’d know, and then she could do whatever she wanted. And he wouldn’t act hurt if she didn’t want to. Really, he wouldn’t. Not this time.

Think of something else. O.K. “The Exorcist”—this old novel he’d found in his dormitory lounge. Richard had seen the movie with the possessed girl whose head spins on her neck like a top, but he hadn’t known that it came from a book—not that the book was great literature or anything. Still, it was pretty interesting. The writer had done a lot of research on exorcisms, and some of the cases were scary enough to make you believe in the Devil, at least while you were reading the novel. It turned out that there were certain priests who cast out demons as a specialty. That was their job, their market niche, waiting around like firemen for the alarm to go off. Demon in Idaho housewife! Demon in Delaware bus driver! How weird was that? As if being a priest weren’t strange enough already. Richard had been sort of religious when he was young, he’d said prayers before meals and gone to Sunday school, where he’d stuck cutouts of bearded men onto felt backdrops. Church was fine, he’d always felt good afterward. He could even see maybe becoming religious again someday, when he was a lot older. But giving up women? Never kissing a woman, never having a woman’s legs around you—

He sat up and reached for the glass of water Ana had left for him on the bedside table. He’d knocked it over last weekend and made enough of a fuss to wake her, but he didn’t think he should try that again, so he took care picking it up and putting it down after he’d drunk his fill.

He settled back against the pillow. He closed his eyes, but just then Ana made a little snort and moved beside him, giving off a fresh wave of warmth, and, faintly, that sweet warm bed-smell of hers, like baking bread, and he lay there tensed, waiting, but she didn’t move again. He heard the clock tick, his own breath returning, jagged and raspy.

He looked up toward the ceiling, at a thin bar of light leaking though the shades from the street lamp outside. No more thinking about priests—that didn’t help. O.K., then, the Odyssey. He should read it again. He was going to, for sure, this time in the grownup version! He could get through a few speeches and descriptions, sort of earn his way to the good parts, especially the slaughter at the end. He liked the idea of Odysseus coming home after all his wanderings and screwups and setting things right, taking back his woman and his house, no discussion, no messing around.

Then he would read the Iliad. Also “War and Peace” and “The Brothers Karamazov.” All the books that Ana had on her shelf, and actually liked. Richard was an econ major and didn’t have much time for outside reading, and when he did he kicked back with a mystery, or something scary. O.K., so he wasn’t a big literary type—so sue him! He’d like to see one of those sensitive souls handle the stuff he was dealing with in his International Environmental Economics seminar. Abatement Strategy Modules. Alternative Equity Criteria. General Equilibrium Impact Analyses. Go for it, he thought. Be my fucking guest.

Not that Ana was like that—a snob. She wasn’t. She really loved these books, they were important to her, and Richard knew that he hadn’t been entirely honest about his own tastes when they first met. He’d allowed her to think that he was a great one for the classics, and she had believed him because she had the idea that Columbia students were not only smart but cultured, and that they went to the university not to set themselves up for a fat job later on but to search for knowledge and wisdom. To become better people. She was naïve that way. Richard had liked her innocence, and the sense of adult benevolence it gave him. She was a few years older than he, and at first it sort of evened things out, him knowing the score while humoring her, letting her have her notions.

That was how he saw it then, in the beginning. Not anymore. After two

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months with Ana, he knew himself to be the green, untested one. Her family was Russian but they'd lived for many years in Chechnya, where her father managed a food-processing plant. During the war, the factory had been destroyed and Ana's oldest brother had been killed. The family lost everything. She'd been sent to live with her mother's mother in Tel Aviv—a widow, mean as a witch from some fairy tale. Now she was staying with an aunt here in Queens, and working illegally at a restaurant on Amsterdam. That was where Richard had met her. He'd heard her speaking Russian to another waitress, and when she came to his table he tried out a few phrases from his one year of high-school Russian, and she had almost wept with surprise and joy.

She wasn't his type, Ana—a bit heavy, round in the face. Little pockmarks on her forehead. Her English was pretty good but thickly accented. He hadn't meant to ask her out. But then he did, the very next night. A week later she took him home, to this small attic room in her aunt's house. They were just having fun, that was how he'd seen it, the two of them having some fun before going their separate ways, as people did, people their age with their whole lives still ahead of them. You didn't want to get tied down now, when you didn't know who you might still meet and what might open up, what chances and adventures.

That was the idea. Some good times, no strings. But after a month or so he saw that Ana had gone all serious on him. She tried to pretend she hadn't, but she had, and he knew it, and made up his mind to break things off. It would be wrong to take advantage of her. Also the long subway ride from his dorm and back was getting to him. But then he found that he couldn't break it off, because even with friends, even talking to other girls, he missed her, missed her throaty voice and the strange, direct way she said things, missed giving her pleasure and seeing it in her eyes. He was desolate on the nights that he had to sleep in his dorm room.

Loud voices outside—men's voices, speaking in Spanish. Ana shifted, murmured. The voices moved on. Silence. Richard sat up and took another drink of water.

Being away from her felt unnatural now. Alone in bed, sitting in class, writing an e-mail to his parents, he thought of her and ached. But it couldn't last—he knew that. And he knew now that she would be the one to break it off. Ana was already who she was going to be, and he was not. She was a woman, and he was not a man. He looked like a man, even an interesting man, dark and ruggedly handsome, with a grave, thoughtful air. But his looks didn't fit the way he felt—the way he knew himself to be. Sometimes, walking down the street, he glanced at the window of a store and was thrown by the sight of himself, as if he were wearing a costume.

Girls liked him. They assumed certain things about him, and he'd learned to act his part, but he knew this wouldn't hold up much longer with Ana. Not because she was older but because his ways of thinking were smaller than hers. He wasn't curious, as she was, didn't like and trust others, as she did, for all the hardships of her life. He complained a lot, and she never complained. And though he hated being apart from her, when they were out together he looked at other women and imagined having them, and even brought their images to this bed. Sometimes she caught him studying her coldly—wishing she'd lose weight, do something about those pockmarks—and he could feel his own smallness and triviality as the color drained from her face.

Soon enough she would see him clearly, and understand her mistake. He was already watching for signs of retreat: impatience, condescension, a certain weariness. He'd seen all this before, with the only other girl he'd been close to. Had Ana really not caught on yet? How could she not know? Was it just because he was handsome, and always ready?

Or because he was American, and maybe of use in some scheme?

No! Ana didn't think that way. And what sort of mean spirit, knowing her, could even imagine such a thing? Jesus! What had got into him? Ana was a noblewoman. O.K., that sounded like something from a book, but it was true. It was just that she'd come to him too soon. . . . She was the one he should have met later, after he'd stuck his neck out and suffered some losses, after he'd really messed things up, and been fucked over, and got lost, and kept going anyway—when this little green soul of his had taken some lumps and some weather and bulked up into a man's soul, so that he could look out of his own eyes and not feel like a kid in a mask. Then he could have come to her and strung the great bow, and laid waste to all these chickenshit doubts and wants, and claimed love as his right.

The bar of light on the ceiling paled away to nothing. Richard heard the groaning of the pipes downstairs—the aunt was in the shower. A car horn blared in the street below, and Ana stirred, turned, moved against him. He felt her hand on his hip. She whispered his name. He kept his eyes closed and did not answer. ♦

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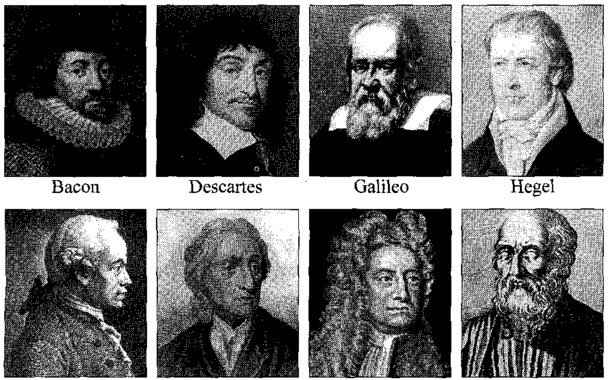
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THE CRITICS

THE SKY LINE

HELLO, COLUMBUS

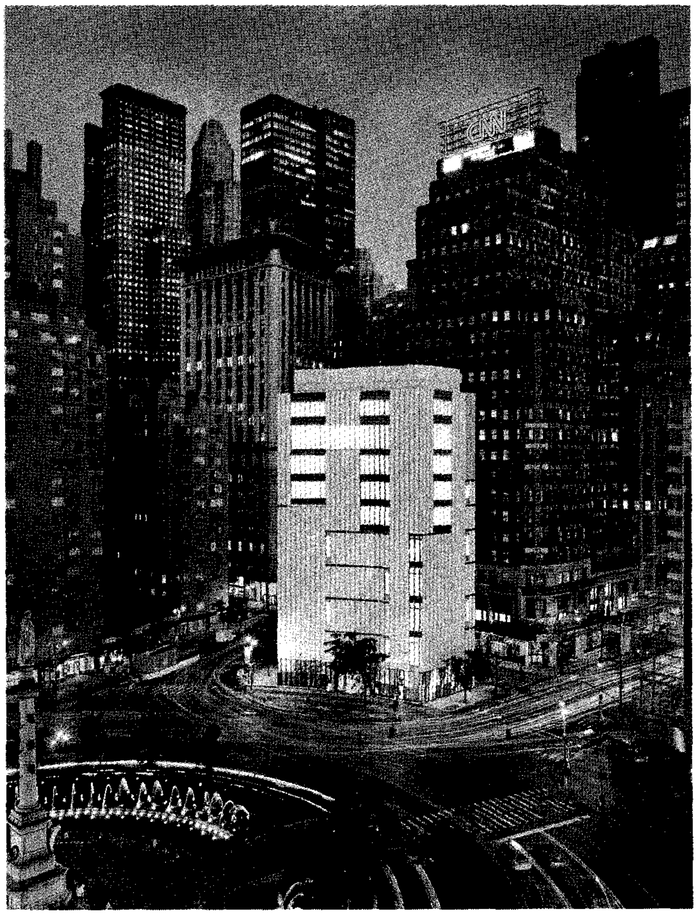
A building that can't break free of its predecessor.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

Huntington Hartford's old Gallery of Modern Art—the white marble bonbon that stood at 2 Columbus Circle from 1964 until a couple of years ago—was a hard building to love but became an even harder one to hate. Excoriated by critics when it went up, then championed by preservationists when it was threatened with destruction, the building provides an object lesson in the inexorable march of architectural fashion and may point to an even more basic truth about people and buildings: we get used to things we don't like and then come to like things we've got used to. The eventual decision to refurbish the building entirely has also provided a young Oregon architect named Brad Cloepfil with a dauntingly controversial commission.

The Gallery of Modern Art, one of several quixotic cultural projects launched by Hartford, an heir to the A. & P. fortune, who died earlier this year at the age of ninety-seven, was originally intended to house his collection of figurative works and to stand as a riposte to what Hartford saw as the reign of abstraction at the Museum of Modern Art. The architect was Edward Durell Stone. Stone had been a leading American exponent of the International Style, but, in the fifties, his new wife, a fashion writer he met on an airplane, encouraged him toward elegance and decoration, and he began to fill his buildings with glitter and marble and screens and gold columns.

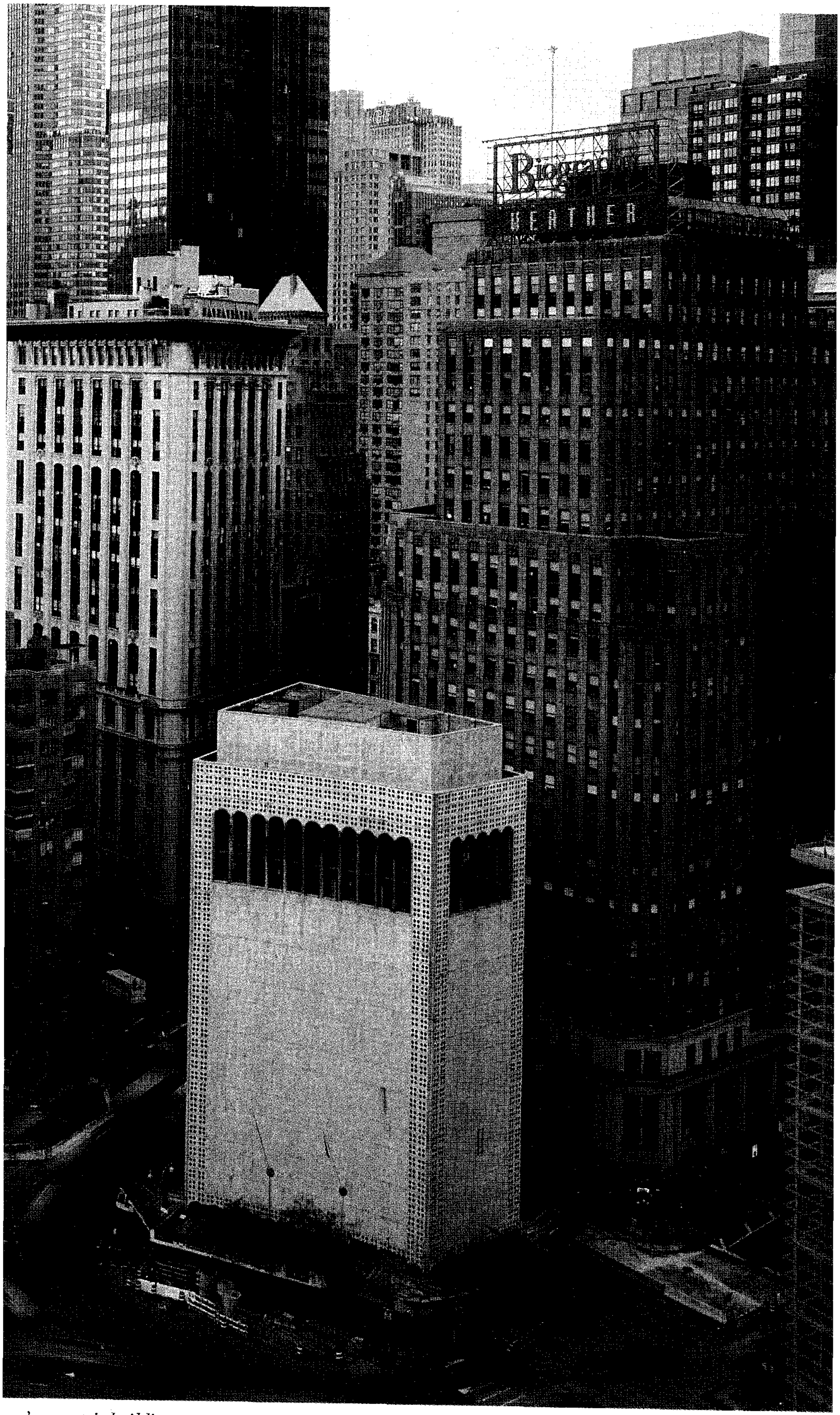
As a museum, the Columbus Circle building was a disaster. The galleries, tricked out with expensive wood panelling and brass fixtures, were cramped, and the institution closed after five financially ruinous years. And yet somehow the structure's dainty columns, tiny portholes, huge arches, and vast windowless expanses of flat, unadorned white marble embedded themselves more deeply into the consciousness of New Yorkers than many better buildings. So what if it looked like a Bauhaus version of the Alhambra—or, as Ada Louise Huxtable, then the architecture critic at the *Times*, put it, "a die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollypops"? Amid the austere glass boxes of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, it seemed to strike a blow for quirky individualism. Huxtable's harsh judgment gave rise to a nickname—the Lollipop Building—that was as much affectionate as mocking.



Brad Cloepfil's overhaul keeps the proportions of the old building.

ABOVE: BENOÎT JACQUES; BELOW: DAVID ALLEE

The building eventually wound up in the hands of the city, which, in 1998, decided to sell it to the highest bidder. The city repeatedly refused to have its own Landmarks Preservation Commission consider giving 2 Columbus Circle landmark status, a move that provoked outrage but kept the building salable and more or less sealed its fate. Whether or not the building deserved landmark status depends on what you think a landmark should be: it wasn't great architecture, but it had unique qualities and some historical importance. In 2002, the city agreed to sell it to the Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Crafts Museum. The museum was eager for an architect who had never built in New York before, and hired Cloepfil, whose firm, Allied Works Architecture, in Portland, was just completing its first major project, the sharp and serene Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis. Cloepfil started work on his design while the legal struggle to preserve the building was in progress, but in 2005 the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me's eccentric building went against the modernist mainstream of the sixties. Photograph by Robert Polidor

THE NEW YORKER, NOV. 12, 1927

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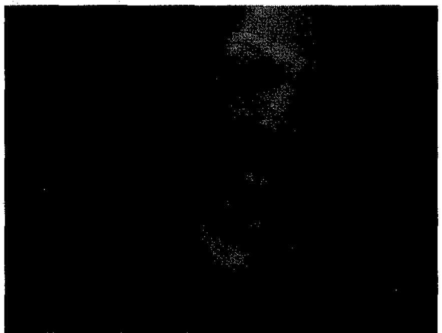

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preservationists lost in court, and construction began. The building will open next month.

Cloepfil ended up all but demolishing the original building and creating a new one of exactly the same shape and size, and almost the same color. He kept the gentle curve reflecting the shape of Columbus Circle but changed just about everything else. To let light into the interior, he made long linear incisions, two feet wide, in the façade. These glass channels—Cloepfil has called them "ribbons of light"—make a number of right-angle turns across the façade. In place of Stone's marble are twenty-two thousand terra-cotta tiles specially made with a slightly iridescent glaze. Depending on the light, they look white or off-white or sparkle with tiny hints of color. Cloepfil told me that the use of ceramic and glass tied the new building to its role as a museum of craft, while its echo of the original marble's color would suggest continuity with the earlier building. Fair enough. But that dual goal encapsulates the building's main problem. Cloepfil is trying as hard as he can to be different while trying also to be the same. Rarely has an architect been pulled so completely in opposite directions.

In some respects, he probably didn't have much choice. He couldn't make the building taller, because of zoning laws, and he couldn't make it bigger, because it already filled every inch of its site. And, since museums require mostly solid, windowless walls, he was stuck with those, too. Cloepfil is a sophisticated architect who, at his best, can endow simple geometries with a powerful dignity. His style couldn't be more different from that of Edward Durell Stone's late period, which dances on the edge of kitsch, and he has tried to transform Stone's fussy marble froufrou into something serious and tasteful. Sometimes, as in the long, turning lines of glass, he manages to assert himself firmly enough to keep the old building at bay. At other times, like at the base of the building, where he has kept all but one of Stone's lollipop-shaped columns and put them behind glass, he seems to have given up altogether and settled for a curatorial role. Ultimately, Cloepfil has been trapped between paying homage to a legendary building and making something of his own. As a result, if you knew the old building, it is nearly impossible to get it out of your mind when you look at the new one. And, if you've never seen Columbus Circle before, you probably won't be satisfied, either: the building's proportions and composition seem just as odd and awkward as they ever did.

But if you go inside, entering through the glass-enclosed lobby, from which an elegantly detailed staircase of wood and steel leads up to four floors of galleries, it turns out that Cloepfil has done the impossible—making the building's interior at long last functional, logical, and pleasant to be in. He figured out early on that Stone had made a huge mistake putting the building's core—its elevators, stairs, and rest rooms—in the center, because that left just a tiny doughnut of usable space around the perimeter. Cloepfil moved two staircases behind the elevators, opening up space on every floor and making decent-sized exhibition galleries possible.

This move also enabled the building to address Columbus Circle more effectively than before. Galleries now have windows looking out over Central Park and, on the ninth floor, there will be a restaurant featuring an entire wall of glass, something the museum insisted on despite Cloepfil's objections that it would damage the composition of his façade. This might seem a little precious—why shouldn't the restaurant have a nice, big window?—but Cloepfil was right. The window, running between two vertical glass ribbons, creates a huge "H" on the façade, a pity, because the ribbons are the heart of his design and its most brilliant feature. Once you are inside, you discover that they run not only up and down the façade but also horizontally, into the museum itself: from each vertical window notched into a gallery's wall, a glass ribbon stretches across the floor and you seem to be walking on thin air. Looking down can be vertiginous at first, but the glass channels allow light to permeate up and down the building, and tie the entire building, inside and out, together in a way that underscores what is new about it. It's not just that they look different from anything in Stone's original museum; requiring a completely different structure and engineering, they remind you that this is in almost every way a new building, albeit trapped in the body of an old one, screaming to get out. ◆

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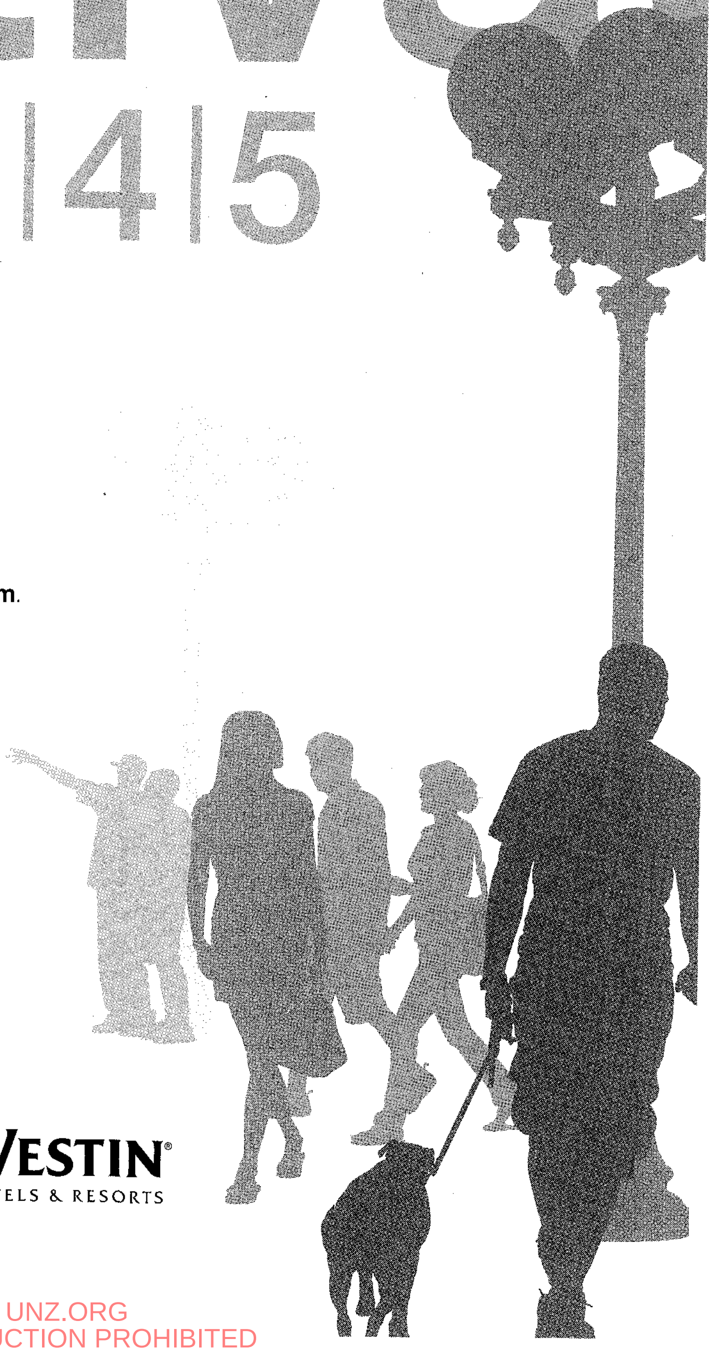


MUSICAL EVENTS

MARK THE MUSIC

Singing Shakespeare at Glimmerglass.

BY ALEX ROSS

William Shakespeare felt a certain ambivalence toward music as an art, if his words are any guide to his thoughts. The plays overflow with merry songs, sweet airs, and other healthy-minded sounds, but they also contain many instances of music causing mischief, telling lies, or casting shadows. In "Measure for Measure," the Duke says of a song, "'Tis good," but adds, "Music oft hath such a charm/To make bad good, and good provoke to harm." The opening line of "Twelfth Night"—"If music be the food of love, play on"—has been quoted and needlepointed ad nauseam, but the lines that follow are usually omitted, on account of their sardonic cast: "Give me excess of it; that surfeiting,/The appetite may sicken, and so die." Hamlet's dying utterance, "The rest is silence," gives way to an ironic musical collision: first, Horatio imagines that "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," and then the stage directions call for a "march within"—the thuggish sound of Fortinbras's army. You get the sense that Shakespeare, the lord of language, viewed music with narrowed eyes, as if sizing up a rival nation.

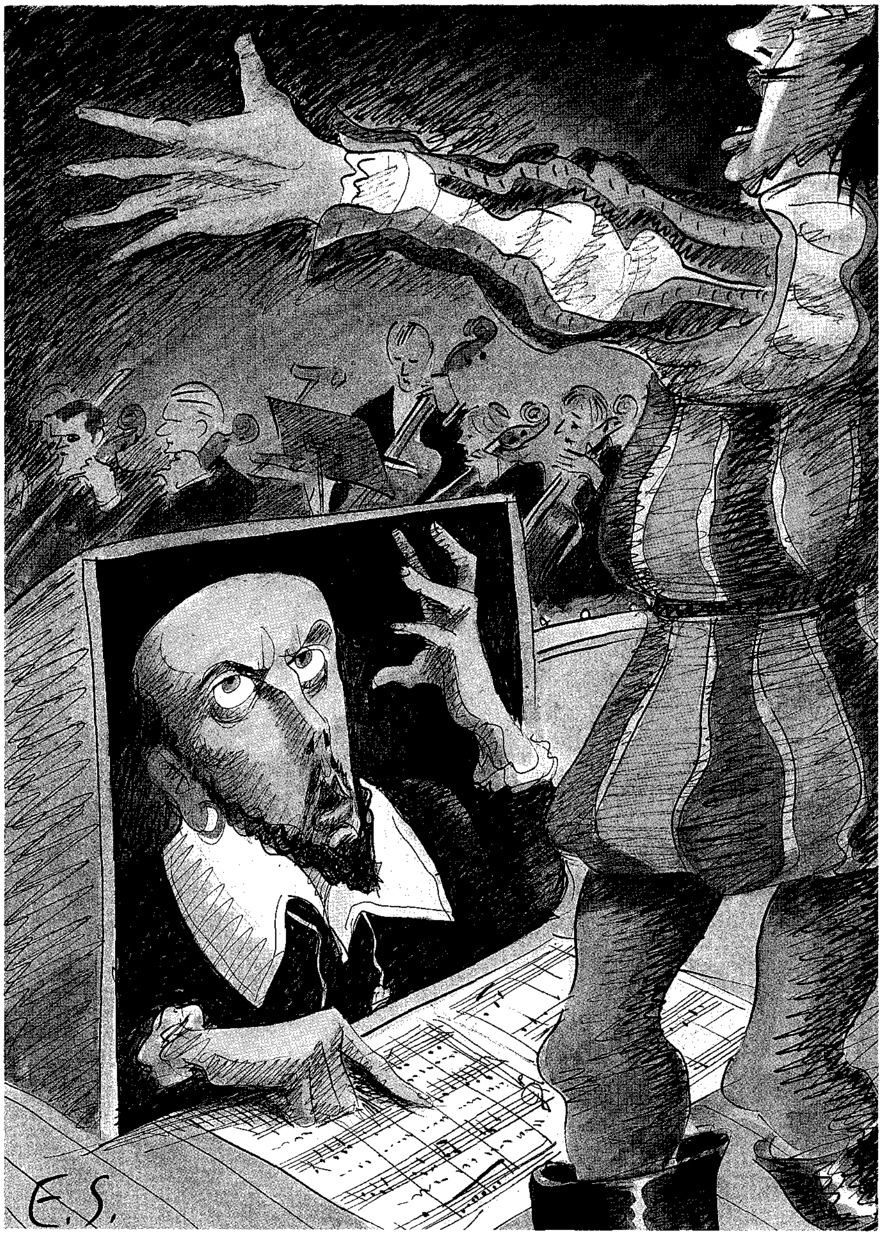
When composers have tried to set Shakespeare, they have run up against the problem that his verse creates music in the mind, next to which even the most inspired efforts may be found wanting. Nonetheless, the number of Shakespeare operas runs well into the hundreds. Of that vast corpus, few are universally judged to be successful. If you bring up the subject at an intermission, you will probably obtain a unanimous vote only for Verdi's final two operas—the compassionately harrowing "Otello" and the wistfully uproarious "Falstaff." Thereafter, the argument rages. (My short list of favorites includes Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream," Berlioz's "Beatrice and Benedict," and Bernstein's "West Side Story.") To set Shakespeare is to risk fiasco: Samuel Barber's "Antony and Cleopatra" flopped at the Met in 1966, thanks in part to overblown sets by Franco Zeffirelli, and Humphrey Searle's twelve-tone "Hamlet" ground to a halt in the middle of a Covent Garden performance when the lead baritone lost his voice and no one was available to step into the role.

This summer, Glimmerglass Opera, in Cooperstown, New York, adopted a Shakespeare theme, presenting all its productions in a Globe-like set, designed by John Conklin. Glimmerglass has avoided familiar territory to investigate more unexpected corners of Shakespeopera. It is offering the first fully staged American performances of Wagner's second completed opera—"Das Liebesverbot," or "The Ban on Love," based on "Measure for Measure"—and is also presenting Cole Porter's "Kiss Me, Kate," which takes place behind the scenes of a star-crossed production of "The Taming of the Shrew." And it is staging Bellini's "I Capuleti e i Montecchi" and Handel's "Giulio Cesare in Egitto," both of which field Shakespearean characters (Romeo and Juliet, Caesar and Cleopatra) without having a direct relation to the plays. A few days at Glimmerglass—whose season ends this week—left me with the feeling that, if composers have seldom conquered Shakespeare, they have at least held their own on treacherous terrain.

"Das Liebesverbot" was the chief discovery of Glimmerglass—a flawed but diverting work that shows the master of music drama in an embryonic stage. Wagner revered Shakespeare, calling him the "mightiest poet of all time." Shakespearean elements recur throughout his mature operas—in the potion-laced, Romeo-and-Juliet-ish love of Tristan and Isolde; in the self-lacerating monologues of Wotan in "Die Walküre," redolent of "King Lear"; in the midsummer rituals of "Die Meistersinger." Yet only in this apprentice piece, from 1836, did Wagner take on Shakespeare directly—perhaps because, at the age of twenty-two, he was too young to know better.

At the time, Wagner was aligned with the Young Germany movement in literature, which agitated for freedom of expression both in politics and in private life. He chose "Measure for Measure" mainly because it provided him with a juicy target in Angelo, the puritanical lawgiver whose hidden desires eventually precipitate his downfall. The scene is shifted from Vienna to Palermo, and Angelo is renamed Friedrich, so that he becomes a kind of oppressive Teutonic invader. The biggest laugh of the night arrives when one frustrated Sicilian says of Friedrich, "If he can hold out, he must be German indeed." Wagner didn't remain such a libertine or a liberal, but this seemingly formulaic bel-canto score hints at several of his perennial obsessions. The overture begins with bubbly music in the style of Rossini, but the darkly meandering theme representing Friedrich's "ban of love" foreshadows the fateful leitmotifs of the "Ring." When the action moves to a cloister, the murmuring interplay of female voices and strings anticipates the Rhinemaidens in "Das Rheingold." The Dresden Amen appears, as in "Tannhäuser" and "Parsifal." Isabella, the novice who draws Friedrich to his doom, becomes a more significant character in Wagner's libretto, absorbing plot functions that Shakespeare assigned to the cunning Duke, who is dropped altogether; in the end, she embodies worldly wisdom and the redeeming force of love, a Brünnhilde in training.

By making some well-chosen cuts, Glimmerglass evaded the windier passages of Wagner's score—the original version apparently sent the first-night audience into a stupor—and rendered the opera eminently stageworthy. Nicholas Muni, the director, moved the action into nineteen-fifties Sicily, with mostly satisfying results: Wagner meets Fellini, with a little Vegas thrown in for the Carnival scenes. The cast sang well and acted with uncommon vigor: the bass-baritone Mark Schnaible offered a strongly projected, elegantly phrased, unexpectedly sympathetic Friedrich; the soprano Claudia Waite was a forceful, if sometimes wobbly, Isabella; Holli Harrison made for a lustrous Mariana; and Ryan MacPherson lent tenorial warmth to the lusty Luzio. Corrado Rovaris led with a clean, propulsive beat. Listening to the happy applause afterward, I wondered what might have become of Wagner if this opera had triumphed rather than flopped. His career might have come closer to Verdi's than we can imagine.



Shakespeare's verse creates a music of the mind, presenting a challenge for composers.

EDWARD SOREL

There is a link between "Das Liebesverbot" and Bellini's "I Capuleti e i Montecchi," which premièred in 1830: when Wagner was composing his opera, he conducted "I Capuleti" in Magdeburg, where he worked for a time, and later commented that Bellini led him away from "the fumes of prejudice and pedantry." (Pedantry, yes.) Bellini easily surpasses the young Wagner not only in his lyric invention but in the sophistication of his instrumental writing; Giulietta's solo scene in Act I, ennobled by an extended horn solo, is one of the most achingly beautiful creations in bel-canto opera. You need a voice of particular radiance for such spare music to come alive; Glimmerglass had such a singer in Sarah Coburn, who emerged from the company's Young American Artists Program several years ago. To the requisite loveliness of tone Coburn added ample breath control, pinpoint accuracy in coloratura passages, and innately musical phrasing. Sandra Piques Eddy was a finely ferocious Romeo. Anne Bogart's production was a little grim and monochromatic, but Coburn's singing glowed all the more brightly against it.

Michael MacLeod, Glimmerglass's artistic director, is finishing his second season as the successor to Paul Kellogg, who led the company for most of its history. So far, his choices seem admirable. He has yet to alter significantly Kellogg's programming formula, which mixed Baroque and bel canto, offbeat nineteenth- and twentieth-century pieces, and lighter fare—although the production of "Kiss Me, Kate," smartly directed by Diane Paulus, represents a new venture into musical theatre. It was a pleasure to hear a Broadway classic with appealing young voices and without distorting amplification. If, at the end of the weekend, most patrons went away humming "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" rather than anything in Wagner or Bellini, that was only fitting; somehow I doubt that Shakespeare would have been much of an opera guy.

On my way to Glimmerglass, I stopped at Bard College to hear another operatic rarity: Karol Szymanowski's "King Roger," a mystical, erotically tinged drama about a medieval Sicilian monarch who falls under the spell of a charismatic shepherd preacher. Leon Botstein, who does double duty as the president of Bard and as its chief conductor, has earned the gratitude of twentieth-century-opera fans by presenting fascinating repertory each summer: Shostakovich's "The Nose," Marc Blitzstein's "Regina," and now this Szymanowski work, which was composed between 1918 and 1924 and ranks among the most opulently imagined operas of the period. Alas, Botstein sometimes resuscitates an obscure piece only to put it back into a coma. Under his baton, "King Roger" periodically hovered at the edge of a sonic anarchy that the composer did not notate in his score. A similar cloud hung over Bard's world-première presentation, earlier in the summer, of the original version of Prokofiev's ballet "Romeo and Juliet," directed and choreographed by Mark Morris. Prokofiev initially wrote a happy ending, in which the lovers disappear into a purer sphere. Botstein's players, however, remained earthbound, and Morris's dancers looked distinctly starved for the food of love. ♦

BOOKS

THE FORBIDDEN WORLD

Did a sixteenth-century heretic grasp the nature of the cosmos?

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Giordano Bruno fled the Inquisition to write and to speak across Northern Europe.

LORENZO MATTOTTI

In 1600, Rome's Campo de' Fiori, now a nice plaza lined with cafés, was one of the city's execution grounds, and on Ash Wednesday of that year Giordano Bruno, a philosopher and former priest accused of heresy by the Inquisition, was taken there and burned. The event was carefully timed. Ash Wednesday is the primary day of Christian penance. As for the year, Pope Clement VIII chose it because 1600 was a jubilee for the Church—a festivity that would be enhanced by the execution of an important heretic. Bruno rode to the Campo on a mule, the traditional means of transport for people going to their death. (It was also a practical means. After years in the Inquisition's prisons, many of the condemned could not walk.) Once he arrived and mounted the pyre, a crucifix was held up to his face. According to a witness, he turned away angrily. He could not speak; he had been gagged with a leather bridle. (Or, some say, an iron spike had been driven through his tongue.) He was tied to the stake, and the pyre was lit. When it had burned out, his remains were dumped into the Tiber. As Ingrid Rowland writes in "Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $27), the Church thereby made Bruno a martyr. But "a martyr to what?" she asks. That is the question that her book, the first full-scale biography of Bruno in English, tries, with difficulty, to answer.

Bruno was born in Nola, a small city east of Naples, in 1548. His father was a mercenary in the service of the Spanish crown, which had ruled Naples since the beginning of the century. According to Rowland, he was a lonely, bookish boy. At the age of fourteen, he was sent to Naples to be educated—a move that apparently left a permanent mark on his mind. At that time, Rowland writes, Naples was the fifth-largest city in the world, housing masses of "fishermen, seamstresses, vendors, porters, laundresses, carpenters, sausage makers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and water sellers who went barefoot in the mild climate and lived largely on bread and figs." Above those plain folk were the grandees who ruled the city; below them were the beggars and prostitutes who swarmed the alleys. No one knows where Bruno lived during his first years in Naples, but Rowland imagines him in crowded student quarters, "a solitary teenager plunged suddenly into urban chaos." This experience, she says, taught him survival skills, which he would need in his life. It may also have been the source of what would later be his governing image of the universe: fullness, infinitude.

At seventeen, he entered the Dominican monastery of San Domenico Maggiore, in Naples, a learned institution staffed with sons of the nobility. That didn't mean that they behaved any better than other priests—or noblemen—of the period. During Bruno's time, friars of San Domenico were involved in cases of assault, theft, and forgery, not to mention the chronic problem of fornication. But this rich monastery was useful to Bruno. There, Rowland writes, he learned to move among the ruling class. He also acquired intellectual rigor. San Domenico was a conservative institution. It taught Scholastic philosophy—the world of Aristotle, revived and Catholicized by St. Thomas Aquinas and other scholars of the Middle Ages—as if no other philosophies existed. They did exist. From the early Renaissance onward, that world picture—limited, tidy, and comforting—had been challenged by a rebirth of the ideas of Plato, who had a very different slant on things: visionary, poetic. After Bruno's Scholastic training at San Domenico, Rowland says, he encountered Neoplatonism, and it transformed his thinking. She gives this a lot of space. As a Renaissance historian—see "The Culture of the High Renaissance" (1998) and "From Heaven to Arcadia"

(2005), a collection of essays for *The New York Review of Books*—she has been dealing with Neoplatonism for years, and she likes the idea of philosophy as rapture. That's probably why she decided to write a book on Bruno. She sees Neoplatonism as his beacon, but she is glad for him that, before he stuck his head up among the stars, his feet had been planted on the ground by Aristotle and Aquinas.

That dichotomy becomes the basis of her portrait of Bruno. He had three personalities, she says. One was Scholastic—strict, system-building. The second was "a Platonist's poetic exaltation." He added a third, all his own: "a dark wit born in his parents' little house . . . and stiletto-sharpened on the streets of Naples." In time, the darkness came to rule his thoughts. In one of his books, he described himself as "irritated, recalcitrant, and strange, content with nothing, stubborn as an old man of eighty, skittish as a dog that has been whipped a thousand times." His nickname, he said, was "the exasperated."

He became a priest at the age of twenty-four and received the equivalent of a doctorate in theology three years later. He was apparently a brilliant student and also, now and then, an exasperated one. Upon moving into his cell at the monastery, he disposed of the holy art—pictures of the Madonna, St. Catherine of Siena, a pious bishop—that decorated its walls. Another time, in a discussion with an older priest, he defended the logic (not the substance) of an argument made by the fourth-century priest Arius that Christ was not fully divine—the so-called Arian heresy. Eventually, a copy of Erasmus's proscribed "Commentaries," with notes by Bruno in its margins, was found in the latrine that he used. Even at the height of the Counter-Reformation, which this was, such offenses, distributed over ten years in the monastery, seem trifling. They sound like notations from the F.B.I. file of some poor professor who dared to teach Gorky in the fifties. Nevertheless, Bruno, at around the age of twenty-seven, was informed that he was being investigated by the Inquisition. Was someone trying to get rid of him? (Why the latrine search, an unpleasant task in the sixteenth century?) Was *he* trying to get out of the priesthood? (Why annotate the Erasmus? Why not just read it?) Whatever the real story, Bruno, hearing of the proceedings, discarded his priest's garments and headed north, eventually crossing the border into Switzerland. To the Church authorities, that was as good as a confession; they defrocked and excommunicated him in absentia. To Bruno, apparently, it was a liberation, and he became the man we know, or think we know: the freethinker, the heretic, the man who would be burned.

For fifteen years, he travelled—to Geneva, Toulouse, Lyon, Paris, London, Oxford, Wittenberg, Prague, Helmstedt, Frankfurt, Zurich, Padua, Venice—never staying more than two or three years in any city. Wherever he went, he looked for a job teaching philosophy, and in some places he got one. In Paris, he gave a series of thirty lectures on logic and metaphysics. Elsewhere, he had less luck. At Oxford, when he gave a tryout presentation, the audience laughed at his accent and his Neapolitan way of talking with his hands. (He hated the English ever after. They "look down their noses," he said, "laugh at you . . . fart at you with their lips.") Sometimes he damaged his own cause. During his stay in Geneva, he published a broadsheet listing twenty mistakes that a highly placed professor had made in a single lecture. He was sued for slander and had to leave town in a hurry.

By about the age of twenty-eight, he was publishing as well as teaching. In his lifetime, he produced some thirty works—treatises, pamphlets, dialogues, poems, even a play. Some of these writings were in Latin, the language of his schooling; accordingly, they were rigorous, systematic, Scholastic. The others were in vernacular Italian, and these were often ebullient, concrete, and dramatic—Neoplatonic, by Rowland's definition. Either way, they advanced the concept of the universe that he said he had begun developing soon after his departure from Italy.

In this system, there were three main ideas. One was heliocentrism, the notion that the sun, not the Earth, was the center of the universe. This revision of the standard, Ptolemaic cosmos was, of course, not original to him. It had been made by the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus in 1543, five years before Bruno was born. But while Copernicus's repositioning of the earth and the sun was a radical proposal—indeed, a heresy (the Church needed the Earth, the arena of salvation, to be the center of the universe)—in other respects his cosmos was quite orthodox: a finite structure consisting of fixed spheres that revolved in concentric circles, just as in Ptolemy. Bruno, on the other hand, proposed an infinite cosmos, consisting of innumerable heliocentric worlds. This, his second and most important idea, was also not new. It had been put forth by Nicholas of Cusa, a German cardinal, in the fifteenth century. But here, too, Bruno went further, claiming that the universe was a vast, wheeling, unknowable thing, and that all theories about it, including his own, were not descriptions but merely approaches—"models," as we would call them today.

Finally, Bruno developed an atomic theory, whereby everything that existed was made up of identical particles—"seeds," in his terminology. Other people, notably Lucretius, had had this idea, but, again, Bruno expanded it. Not only were all parts of the cosmos constituted of the same elements, but God, whom the Church strictly set apart from the material world, resided in these elements. It was his love, informing every "seed," that unified the world.

In all these ideas, there seems to have been a single preoccupation: immensity—things incalculably large and incalculably tiny, and all joined together in a kind of choral exultation. I think that this mental image, more than any quarrel with the Church, underlay Bruno's philosophy. In an Italian dialogue that he wrote in his mid-thirties, he paints a fanciful portrait of his home town, Nola. There, he says, fate has decreed

> that Vasta, wife of Albenzio Savolino, when she means to curl her hair at her temples, shall burn fifty-seven hairs for having let the curling iron get too hot, but she won't burn her scalp and hence shall not swear when she smells the stench, but shall endure it patiently. That from the dung of her ox fifty-two dung beetles shall be born, of which fourteen shall be trampled and killed by Albenzio's foot, twenty-six shall die upside down, twenty-two shall live in a hole, eighty shall make a pilgrim's progress around the yard, forty-two shall retire to live under the stone by the door, sixteen shall roll their ball of dung wherever they please, and the rest shall scurry around at random. . . . Antonio Savolino's bitch shall conceive five puppies, of which three shall live out their natural lifespan and two shall be thrown away, and of these three the first shall resemble its mother, the second shall be mongrel, and the third shall partly resemble the father and partly resemble Polidoro's dog. . . . Paulino, when he bends over to pick up a broken needle, shall snap the red drawstring of his underpants, and if he should blaspheme for that reason, I mean for him to be punished

> thus: tonight his soup shall be too salty and taste of smoke, he shall fall and break his wine flask.

Here the structural rule of Catholic theology, and of Western thought—hierarchy—is serenely discarded. The things of the world are numberless, and they are all equal, and interesting. In Bruno's cosmology, that rule applied not just to humble matters like the goings on in Nola but also to great and sacred things. In his book "The Song of Circe" (1582), the sorceress calls the universe to order, beginning with the sun: "Apollo, author of poetry, quiver bearer, bowman, of the powerful arrows, Pythian, laurel-crowned, prophetic, shepherd, seer, priest, and physician. Brilliant, rosy, long-haired, beautiful-locked, blond, bright, placid, bard, singer, teller of truth. . . . Reveal, I pray, your lions, your lynxes, goats, baboons, seagulls, calves, snakes, elephants. . . . The turtle, butterfish, tuna, ray, whale, and all your other creatures of that kind." To enumerate was Bruno's joy and, in some of his writings, such as these, the engine of his dizzying prose.

Another idea of his, which has not attracted as much attention, because it is not a heresy, had to do with "artificial memory," the science of improving recall. This was not a side project. It was the subject of many of his Latin writings, and often the source of his income during his wandering years—he tutored people in memory skills. Ancient orators had used artificial memory systems, mentally attaching their ideas onto statues, or objects in the rooms of a building, so that later, in their minds, they could revisit those statues and rooms, retrieve their ideas, and thus give seven-hour speeches without note cards. Closer to Bruno's time, a Catalan mystic named Ramon Llull had refined the method, imagining memory as a system of concentric wheels. Bruno adopted Llull's schema and enlarged it. Rowland bravely tries to summarize the methods he developed. One involves storing words by their syllables, she says: "the first syllable as an 'agent' who is a mythological figure (the Egyptian Apis bull, Apollo, the witch Circe); the second syllable as an action (sailing, on the carpet, broken); the third syllable as an adjective (ignored, blind, at leisure); the fourth as an associated object (shell, serpent, fetters); the fifth as a 'circumstance' (a woman dressed in pearls, a man riding a sea monster)." Given these rules, Bruno described to his readers how, for example, one would remember the word *numero*, "number." In Rowland's paraphrase:

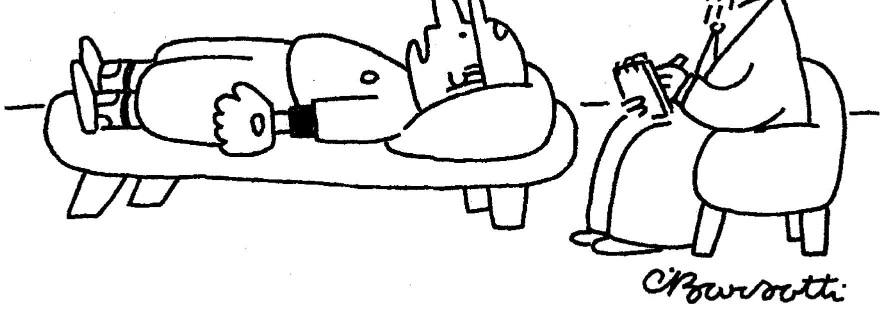
> The "NU" . . . is the Apis bull, "ME" is "on the carpet," "RO" is "neglected." . . . Bruno, clearly influenced by Ramon Llull, advises envisioning these stored sets of syllables and their imagery on concentric wheels, each with thirty compartments corresponding to the various combinations of letters. The outermost wheel in the system stores the agents (or first syllables of words), the second wheel stores the actions (or second syllables), the third wheel stores adjectives (or third syllables), and so on inward to the fifth wheel. A single sentence thus becomes a pageant of mythological characters set in strange places, engaged in strange actions in strange company.

How marvellous, and how utterly incomprehensible! And this was only one of his systems. But Bruno may have used such methods—he was known for his prodigious memory—and with their endless numbers of combinations, as in a giant slot machine, they obviously contributed to his vision of an infinite cosmos.

Inconveniently, that vision was heresy from end to end. If there were countless worlds besides ours, this sidelined the Christian story. Creation, expulsion, salvation: such things might have happened, but somewhere off in a corner, while other things were happening on other planets. Also eliminated was God's difference from humanity. If, as Bruno saw it, God was present in every atom of the universe, then transubstantiation became a silly idea. (God was already in the wine.) Ditto incarnation. Bruno later said that he started having doubts about Jesus at the age of eighteen; in his mature philosophy, the Messiah has no place. Nor does original sin, or pretty much any sin. God "makes his sun rise over good and bad," Bruno wrote. Even devils were going to be pardoned. To lead a virtuous life, you had only to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. As the reader may have noticed by now, much of this constitutes liberal Christian thought in our time. (What Bruno discarded was the Church's literalism—exactly what many of today's believers have done.) Likewise, Bruno's cosmology anticipated modern physics and astronomy. But it did not accord with the views of the sixteenth-century Church. It sounded like Protestantism, or worse.

That was why he had fled his homeland. For fifteen years, he lived in relative safety in the cities of the North, which, if not Protestant, were more tolerant than Italy. Then he did something inexplicable. Was he homesick? Had he become overconfident? In any case, he returned to Italy, and within a year he had been captured by the Inquisition.

Soon after recrossing the border, he took a job tutoring a Venetian nobleman, Giovanni Mocenigo, in artificial memory, but Mocenigo made little progress, and he came to suspect that his teacher was cheating him, holding back some key to the method. So one day he locked Bruno in the attic of his palazzo and called the Inquisition. In his deposition, he accused Bruno of the heresies listed above, plus some more, and of saying (in Mocenigo's words) "that our Catholic faith is full of blasphemies . . . that our opinions are the doctrine of asses, that we have no proof that our faith

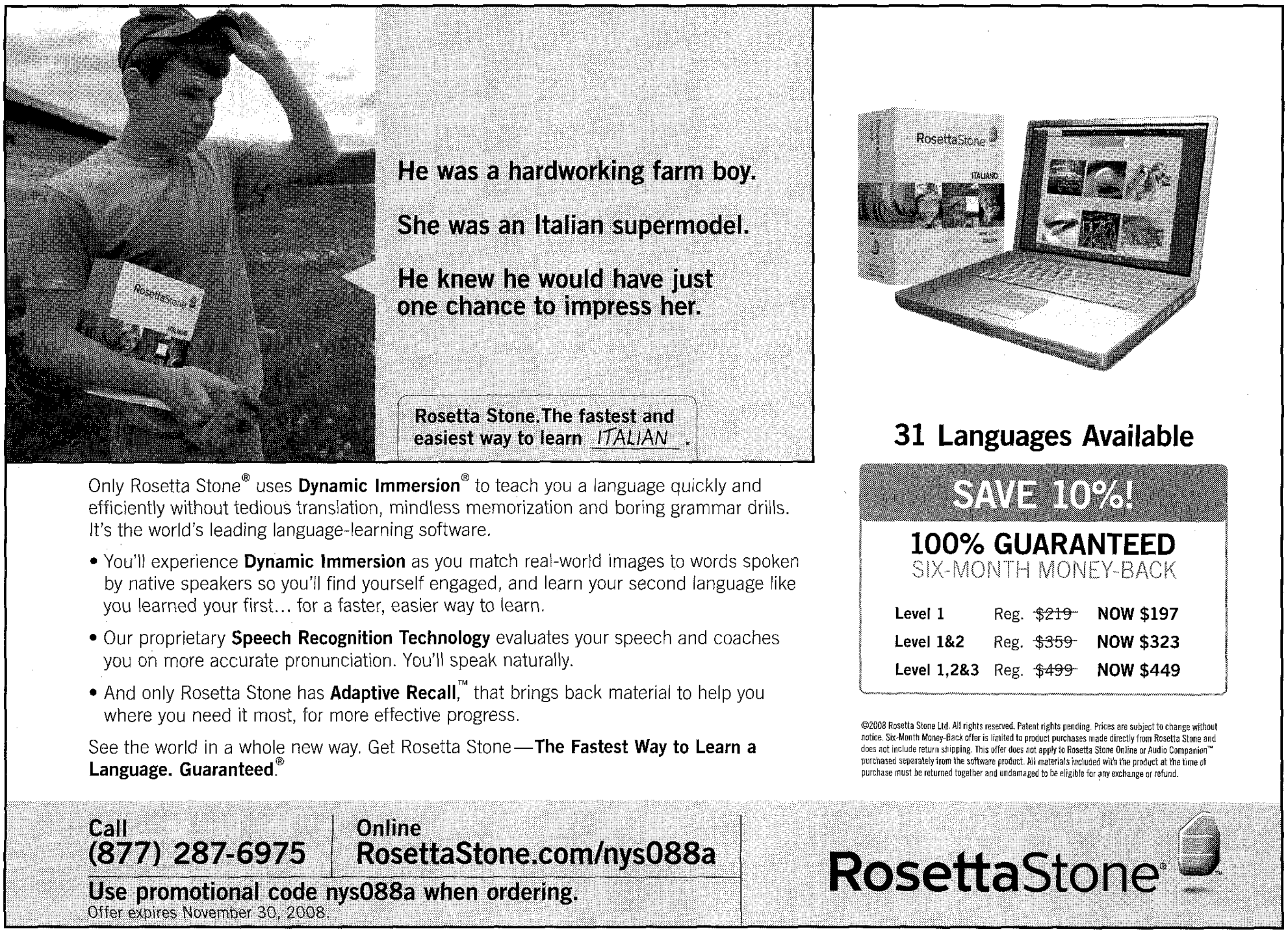


"My life is a powerful blast to center field easily snagged on the warning track."

has any merit with God, and that he marvels at how many heresies God tolerates among Catholics."

Venice was a modern-minded commercial city, far less conservative than Rome or Naples. Furthermore, Bruno eventually recanted. Therefore the Venetian inquisitors let him live, but they did not release him, because the Vatican had got wind of the case and was demanding extradition. Venice complied, and in Rome Bruno was retried on essentially the same charges, with a few additions obtained from his cellmates in Venice. One of them reported that Bruno had called Christ "a dog cuckold fucked dog" and had given him the finger—a not unreasonable action on the part of a man who had been locked up for months in a Venetian hellhole, with four other, equally maddened prisoners. The proceedings in Rome, however, lasted longer—seven years. The Roman jurists, eventually headed by Robert Cardinal Bellarmine, an eminent Jesuit theologian (he was later canonized), were more methodical than the Venetians. They tracked down his books, and read them. According to Rowland, they may also have worried that to execute Bruno, who in his exile had enjoyed the patronage of various noblemen, might be politically unwise. Bruno parried with his inquisitors. Twice he offered to recant and then withdrew the offer. We don't know all the particulars of the inquiry. (The trial records are lost. Only a summary, discovered in the Vatican in 1941, survives.) But, in the end, Bruno gave his inquisitors an unanswerable ultimatum: he told them that if the Pope came forward to certify that the actions he was charged with were definitely heretical, or that the Holy Spirit had said they were, then he would recant. If not, not. The Pontiff did not condescend to join in this discussion, and the inquisitors probably did not invite him to. They insisted on their own ability to recognize false doctrine. So, as in other heresy trials, the conflict came down to a simple quarrel: the Church's word versus the individual's understanding of his own experience. The Church won. Bruno was declared an "impenitent, pertinacious, and obstinate heretic," and he was condemned to die.

Rowland does the best she can with this material, but she has a big problem, which is that very little is known about Bruno's life. She is unable to tell us much of anything about his childhood, his teaching, his friendships, or his moral character. And, when she does have something to report, it is often a wild card, which she has trouble fitting into the rest of the story. She says, for example, that Bruno, after being thrown out by the Roman Catholic Church, was also excommunicated by the Calvinists, in Geneva, and by the Lutherans, in Helmstedt—clearly, organized religion was not for him—but we hear nothing about his prior conversion to these faiths. She also tells us that in his exile he applied repeatedly (she cites three separate occasions) to be taken back into the Roman Catholic Church, and was refused each time. That is curious. Returning to the Church, as



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Bruno knew, would have involved a major act of penance, including the disavowal of most of his writings. How could he—famously intransigent, a champion of free thought—have contemplated that? And, if he did, what possessed him, in a public lecture in Helmstedt, to compare the sitting Pope to the Medusa head, infecting the world with "ignorance and depravity"? Did he think that this would get him back into the Church?

What about his love life? Rowland writes that after his departure from the priesthood he "pursued women with Falstaffian matter-of-factness." Whom, when, where? She doesn't say. Whatever his sexual activities, a passage that Roland quotes from one of his dialogues suggests that he did have strong feelings about women. How could men pine, he asked,

> for that bosom, for that white, for that crimson, for that tongue, for that tooth, for that lip, for that hair, that dress, that mantle, that glove, that slipper, that high heel, that avarice, that giggle, that scorn, that empty window, that eclipse of the sun, that throbbing, that disgust, that stench, that sepulcher, that cesspit, that menstruation, that carrion, that malaria, that uttermost insult and lapse of nature?

This is something other than matter-of-factness. Rowland tries to argue that Bruno didn't really hate women. She says that since this dialogue, written in England, ends with a tribute to Elizabeth I, Bruno "must have believed on some level, that male and female made no difference in the potential of an individual soul." But evidence for such a belief is nowhere in sight. Rowland is well aware of the gaps in her portrait of Bruno's life, and she tries to fill them with other material. For his years in the monastery, she again has almost no facts to go on, so, once she deposits him there, she switches gears and offers a series of history-of-ideas chapters—on Neoplatonism, on Kabbalah, and so forth—in order to let us know what intellectual trends might have influenced him at that time. She is a lively writer, and these chapters are interesting. Still, we're sitting there wondering, How's he doing in the monastery?

We do not get a firm hold on his ideas, either. In the past half century, there have been two large trends in Bruno scholarship. In the nineteen-sixties, the English historian Frances Yates claimed that he was a hermeticist, carrying on the tradition of the Renaissance mystics and alchemists. She called him a "poet-magician." Later, in the nineteen-nineties, this view was disputed by Hilary Gatti, a historian of science, who argued that Bruno's contributions were mainly to natural science, which grew so fast during his time. (Nine years after Bruno died, Galileo invented his telescope, and the information that he gained from it landed him, too, before the Inquisition, under Bellarmine. Rowland thinks that Bellarmine, feeling guilty over Bruno, may have pressed Galileo to recant, and thus saved his life.) Rowland wants nothing to do with the hermeticism theory, and though her book is dedicated to Gatti, she is also skeptical about Bruno's credentials as a scientist. To her, he was primarily a philosopher. Her discussions of his philosophy are often sketchy, however. Trying to explain why the Roman inquisitors took seven years to decide Bruno's case, she guesses that maybe they didn't understand his books. I think she had the same problem. At one juncture, poignantly, she suggests that Bruno may have held back some of his material, so as not to give away the store—the same charge that Giovanni Mocenigo made. As she wrote eight years ago in an essay in *The New York Review of Books*, but apparently could not bear to say in the biography, where so much more was at stake, "His surviving work supplies no clear explanation" of what constituted his philosophy.

The book has one great, compensating virtue. Whatever else Bruno was, he was wild-minded and extreme, and Rowland communicates this, together with a sense of the excitement that his ideas gave him. She quotes from a poem of his:

> Suddenly I am raised aloft by primordial passion;
> I become Leader, Law, Light, Prophet, Father, Author, and Journey,
> Rising above this world to the others that shine in their splendor.
> I wander through every part of that ethereal country;
> Then, far away, as they gape at the marvel, I leave them behind me.

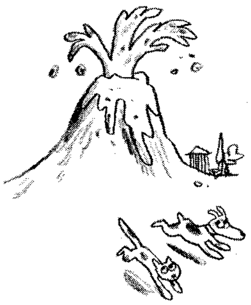
That sounds thrilling, and Rowland relates it to other instances of the exuberance of the late Renaissance; for example, the language of Shakespeare. ("Hamlet" was written within a year or two of Bruno's death.) It's that feeling for the explosiveness of the period, and her admiration of Bruno for participating in it—indeed, dying for it—that is the central and most cherishable quality of the biography. Mocenigo, in his deposition, reported that one day, when he and Bruno were going to church, Bruno told him "that he knew how Christ had performed his miracles, and using the same art he intended to do as much and more." Rowland seems to smile as she considers this "excitable little Neapolitan," in a gondola, on his way to church, "bragging more and more extravagantly" about how he's going to displace the founder of the Church. Even when he's acting crazy, she is fond of him, and I like her for that.

Bruno's writings were placed on the Church's "Index of Forbidden Books," so that they would not lead the faithful astray. As always, important people found a way to get hold of the proscribed material. Kepler told Galileo that one of his (Galileo's) ideas was a steal from Bruno. After the seventeenth century, Bruno seems to have dropped from view, but then, in the nineteenth century, he rose again, as a hero to the revolutionary movements of that time. In 1889, soon after Italy's establishment of a secular republic, a group of Roman students, with the help of eminent thinkers from across Europe—Victor Hugo, Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, Henrik Ibsen—raised a statue in his honor in the Campo de' Fiori. According to Rowland, the statue, which shows Bruno going to his death, looks nothing like him. It depicts a tall, glowering figure, in a cowl, with a book between his manacled hands. The real Bruno was a short, skinny man, who at the time of his execution hadn't worn a Dominican habit for twenty-four years. Furthermore, he was burned naked. The inscription at the base of the statue begins, "To Bruno, from the generation that he foresaw." In other words, the students claimed him for their story. Every year, on the anniversary of his execution, various groups of freethinkers—Masons, atheists, pantheists—gather at the monument, and a representative of Rome's mayoralty places a wreath at its feet. If Bruno had not been burned, would he receive these tributes? Maybe not, but he *was* burned, and he thereby entered our history. Fittingly, a crater of the moon was named for him, in 1960. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Black and White and Dead All Over, *by John Darnton (Knopf; $24.95).* The assistant managing editor of the New York *Globe*, a broadsheet newspaper based in midtown Manhattan, is murdered in his office. Suspects include disgruntled beat reporters, ambitious editors, and conniving board members, and the only person who really seems to know what's going on is Bashir, the Afghan coffee-cart guy. Darnton, a forty-year veteran of the *Times*, precisely plots an old-fashioned murder mystery while also considering the changing nature of modern journalism. Thinly veiled references to current events and people abound: an unscrupulous New Zealand-born media mogul named Lester Moloch has big plans for a takeover of the paper, and an executive editor is fired for "faulty Iraq reporting." Darnton's villain is ultimately undone by a penchant for cliché. Being a psychopathic killer is one thing, but at the *Globe* hackneyed writing is the real crime.

Alfred and Emily, *by Doris Lessing (Harper; $25.95).* In the first half of this unusual blend of fact and fiction, Lessing imagines fulfilled lives for her parents, Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh, in an England untouched by the First World War. Emily becomes a nurse and an activist, and never has children; Alfred becomes a farmer and the father of twin boys. In the second part, Lessing remembers what really happened—she grew up in Rhodesia, the daughter of a wounded veteran with a mind "full of horrors" and a mother doomed to the fate of those "pathetic demented women" who give up their lives for their families. In contrast to the pared-down style of the first part, the second brims with fine observation: memories of a glossy calf recall a pair of black silk gloves, "lying in my rough little hands, limp, shining, as fragile as the shed skin of a snake."



The Challenge, *by Jonathan Mahler (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $26).* In November, 2004, thirty minutes after a military commission convened at Guantánamo Bay to try Salim Hamdan, Osama bin Laden's former driver, news came that halted the proceedings: Hamdan had won a lawsuit, Hamdan v. Rumsfeld, brought on his behalf by a diverse group of lawyers. Mahler is the author of a book about the 1977 Yankees, and, once again, he excels at telling the story of a talented, fractious team coming together for a greater goal: Charles Swift, a naval officer whose passionate commitment to the case scuttled his career and his marriage; Neal Katyal, a brilliant scholar whose arrogance alienated his allies; and Hamdan, a desperate, furious cipher. The case, which reached the Supreme Court, resulted in what one scholar called "the most important decision on presidential power ever," but did not bring Hamdan's release; indeed, despite a subsequent trial and a relatively light sentence (handed down after Mahler's book went to press), the Administration reserves the right to hold Hamdan indefinitely.

Traffic, *by Tom Vanderbilt (Knopf; $24.95).* On the face of it, traffic is a simple problem: too many cars occupy too little asphalt. But why does creating new roads induce more people to drive? Why does removing signs and markings seem to make roads safer? And why do countries with corrupt governments suffer more traffic fatalities than their relatively upstanding neighbors? Vanderbilt investigates such complexities with zeal. Surprising details abound: mimes were once enlisted to stand in crosswalks in Bogotá and mock those who violated traffic laws; ladders are the item most often dropped on Los Angeles freeways; humans, regardless of where in the world they live, tend to spend 1.1 hours a day in transit. "Traffic patterns," Vanderbilt writes, "show us who we are and where we are going."

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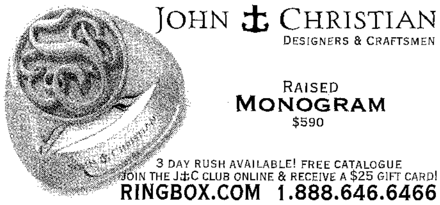

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ON TELEVISION

THE FAB FORTNIGHT

NBC breaks records in Beijing.

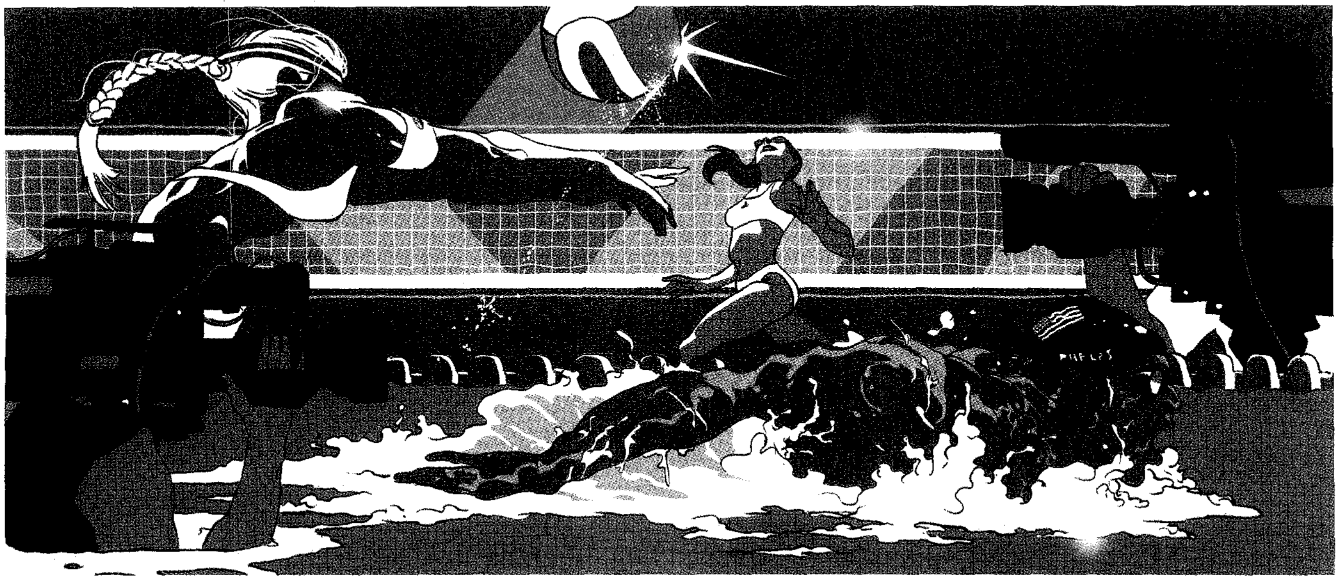
BY NANCY FRANKLIN

Watching the Beijing Olympics, for all the athletic and architectural spectacularity on display, has turned out to be more frustrating than I expected. What an opportunity this was—not, as is obvious, just for China but for the rest of the world, the people whose only chance to visit China would be through the lenses of NBC's cameras. Thirty-six hundred hours of sports and features filled the network and its cable sisters CNBC, MSNBC, USA, Telemundo, Oxygen, and Universal HD, and the Web—but I feel as though all I saw of China on TV was tourists walking on the Great Wall and correspondents eating, or not eating, "funny" food like fried scorpions. And yet NBC was so concerned about not resorting to stereotypes that it more or less banned pagodas and pandas, even though pandas are international currency, always welcome anywhere. I chalk the network's lack of adventurousness up to its being handcuffed—not painfully handcuffed but handcuffed nonetheless—by the Chinese authorities. It seems safe to say that if the country was willing to deny the athlete-activist Joey Cheek a visa—Cheek, one of the most appealing medallists of the 2006 Winter Olympics, has been involved in efforts to publicize China's Sudan connections—it probably felt completely unembarrassed about restricting the snoopier international media while they were in the country.

Still, the glimpses that we did get of Beijing were fascinating, right down to the gray-green haze that pervaded the city for the first few days of the Games (it brought out the amateur meteorologist in us, trying to figure out how much of it was humidity and how much was pollution). And, as for the relative lack of political coverage, if the world was going to accept the Games being in China it also had to accept certain conditions that went with that, and making a lot of noise about Tibet, or political prisoners, or Darfur just wasn't going to fly. As it happened, whatever vacuum there may have been in that regard was filled by the war that Russia started in Georgia on the day of the opening ceremonies—which also underscored for viewers why these biennial fortnights of greatness, of reaching for ideals, are precious; they are not the usual way the world works. NBC commentators often did find ways to take note of the hostly peculiarities, though you rarely heard the stories, so common during previous Olympics, about the Chinese factory-farming method of raising Olympians: taking children away from their parents at a young age and making them hew to virtually military regimens for years. In fact, during one night of the women's gymnastics competition, the commentator Al Trautwig went a little too far in the other direction, reflecting on how fortunate it was that a member of the Chinese team who, he said, had two years earlier begged her parents to let her quit the sport and come home hadn't been allowed to do so.

Even if you accept the compromises you have to make with yourself in order to enjoy the Beijing Olympics, NBC's prime-time coverage had more of a lowest-common-denominator feel than it used to. The network offered more hours than had been shown in all previous Summer Olympics combined, and yet, during the first week, only three people were ever seen in prime time: Michael Phelps and the beach-volleyball players Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh. (Stories about Dara Torres, the quadragenarian swimmer and mother of a toddler, abounded before the Games but petered out once Phelpsmania began.) In the four years since I was last forced to watch beach volleyball, I somehow have not found the maturity and wisdom to take it seriously as an Olympic sport, and, frankly, I doubt that NBC takes it seriously, either, except as a ratings grabber. Every time I turned on the TV, there was

May-Treanor (the short one) and Walsh (the tall one), in those silly little Victoria's Ill-Kept Secret outfits. I now know more about these two women than I know about some of my relatives, including when Walsh met her husband; what's inscribed on her wedding ring (it flew off her finger during a match, and a fair amount of time was spent keeping viewers posted on the successful Search in the Sand); what the tattoo on May-Treanor's left shoulder signifies; and when the two of them plan to start families (soon after the Games are over). I'm not questioning Walsh's and May-Treanor's abilities—they won the gold medal in 2004 and have won more than a hundred consecutive matches—but I don't think their every move had to be documented.



Kerri Walsh, Misty May-Treanor, and Michael Phelps dominated the sand, the pool, and our TV screens.

TOMER HANUKA

Phelps, of course, is another story. As of this writing, it's not known whether he will reach his personal goal of winning eight gold medals in the Games, only that he has won more gold medals than any Olympic athlete in history, has broken records with each win in these Games, and is completely awesome. The downside to the Phelpsiad of the first week is that it meant that we all had to listen to the punishingly shrill swimming announcer Rowdy Gaines. Gaines—like Tim Daggett, the gymnastics commentator—is a former Olympic gold medallist and does know his sport, but he's also a know-it-all in the worst way. (Daggett has one trait that Gaines lacks: a compulsively negative approach. He seems to love saying things like "*big* mistake," "disaster of epic proportions," and "This is not his best event; in fact, it's probably his worst event.") Phelps's phenomenal victories crowded out coverage of other people. Gone are the days when the announcers gave you the names of all the swimmers on the blocks; now they mention only the medal contenders, having become addicted to the constant smashing of records. (The word "smashing" was heard an awful lot during swimming events, partly because a French swimmer used it in an unfulfilled boast about beating the Americans in one of the relays.) Given how swept up viewers were in the swimming, a little more on the sport and several thousand fewer replays of Phelps's open-armed, great-ape reaction to his team's unexpectedly winning the four-hundred-metre freestyle relay would have been fine. I did, however, learn quite a lot about Phelps's armpit anatomy from seeing those pictures over and over. You got any questions about where exactly his sulcus bicipitalis medialis attaches to his processus coracoideus, you come to me.

The camera work at the pool was marvellous, with lots of underwater shots, highlighting not just the swimmers but the translucent honeycombed roof of the Water Cube, the venue where the swimming events were held. And, over in the stadium where the gymnasts were toiling, camerapeople somehow got shots inside the huddles of the teams, and came close enough to the judges' faces to show just how sour they looked. In a way, the cameras were more respectful of the gymnasts than some of the commentators were. Trautwig, remarking on the ankle injury that kept a member of the American women's team from competing in anything but the uneven bars, said, "It's one of the biggest days of her life. . . . It's like having a tear in your wedding dress right before you walk down the aisle." I don't know. I think it's probably more like having an ankle injury that keeps you from competing in anything but the uneven bars.

If you were interested in the less glamorous sports, you turned to the Web, which is now indispensable to Olympics-watching. But in some ways this advance isn't as liberating as it sounds; your computer screen holds you captive more than your TV set used to. How many times have you read the paper or ironed while sitting at your computer? You can't bypass the obnoxious G.E. commercials, and you can't see the action as you fast-forward, which means that there's a lot of fiddling around and swearing involved in finding the spot you want. But one of the things I liked about watching events on the Web was that there was no talking; during a bicycle race that took place in the rain, for example, you could hear the sound of the tires on the wet roadway, and occasional noises from onlookers, and that was it. Watching volleyball, you heard the squeak of sneakers on the gym floor. With all the talk cleared away, you could really imagine what it was like to be not just at the Olympics but, amazingly, *in* the Olympics. ♦

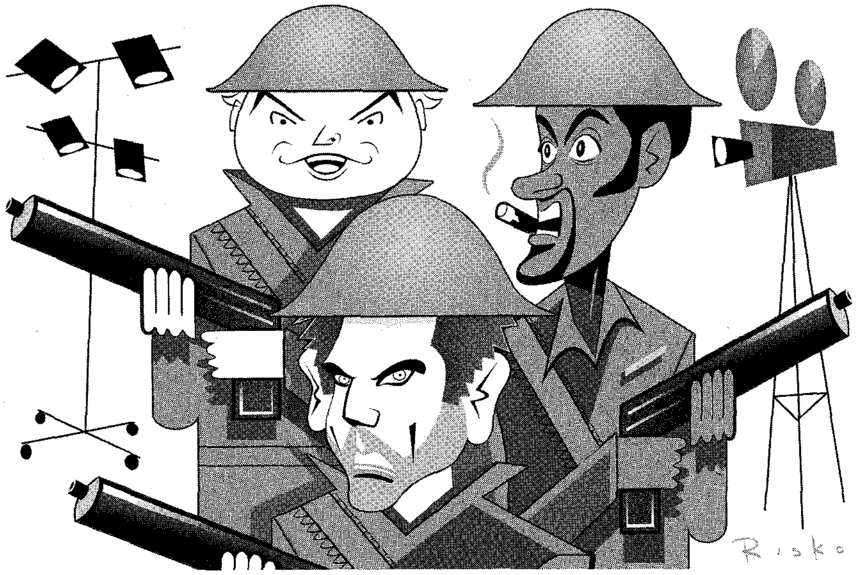
THE CURRENT CINEMA

VANITY CASES

"Tropic Thunder" and "A Girl Cut in Two."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Make sure that you take your seat for "Tropic Thunder" in good time, because all the best jokes are at the start. Before it gets under way, you have to sit through the usual slew of previews and commercials, and there is a delectable moment when you realize that these particular previews are not quite as usual as usual. There is one for "Scorcher VI: Global Meltdown," and one for an immensely solemn gay-monk drama, "winner of the Beijing Film Festival's coveted Crying Monkey Award," with a closeup of fingers interlacing around a rosary. (Its title is much too droll to give away.) The sleight of hand survives into the main feature, a searing tale of courage from the Vietnam War, and it goes on searing right up to the moment at which one of the actors says, "Can we cut?"



Black, Stiller, and Downey, Jr., as actors playing soldiers in "Tropic Thunder."

We have been here before, many times. Fans of "Day for Night" (1973) will remember the brisk, cheery "*Coupez!*" with which François Truffaut—the director of the work but also an actor playing a director—interrupted the flow of the action. And so it is with "Tropic Thunder," which is one film scrunched inside another. The Vietnam movie is supposed to be a savage spectacular, with a bulging budget and a trio of major stars: depleted tough guy Tugg Speedman (Ben Stiller), five-time Academy Award winner Kirk Lazarus (Robert Downey, Jr.), and drug-hazed comic lardass Jeff Portnoy (Jack Black). Viewers should enjoy themselves placing bets as to the actual Hollywood performers on whom these nightmarish figures are based; if, for example, the trailer that we see for Portnoy's latest vehicle, "The Fatties," brings to mind Eddie Murphy's wilder excursions into fleshly humor, so much the better.

Also on set with them, and trying in vain to corral their stampeding egos, is a hapless British director named Damien (Steve Coogan). With a TV show reporting that the production is "one month behind schedule just five days into shooting," the head of the studio hosts a video conference to whip the film back in line. He is a doughy, balding monster with big spectacles and even wider hand gestures, all his power distilled into profanity: a grotesque update, if you will, on the movie executive with the shock of white-hot hair, brought to life by Rod Steiger, in "The Big Knife," more than fifty years ago. It took me half the running time to realize who was playing this new beast, and it was only his voice that triggered the recognition; I suspect that there will be gasps during the end credits, as people see his name and find themselves rethinking the whole movie, marvelling at what could have inspired so stiff an actor to unfurl and bounce around.

Whether his performance is a success, as opposed to a coup, is hard to gauge, so closely does it skirt embarrassment. But then wriggles of unease, and the natural awkwardness of vanity at risk, are very close to this movie's heart. For every laugh, there are two or three winces—the standard ratio for Ben Stiller, who not only stars in the film but also directed it and wrote the script, with Etan Cohen and Justin Theroux. These guys come from the post-punch-line generation, using words not to wrap and polish a sentiment but to file a stream of reports from the borders of taste; their deepest dread is to stay in the comfort zone. At times, this lures them into basic indolence, as when Jack Black—the least well served of the leads in "Tropic Thunder"—vents his exasperation by declaiming the word "shit," plus some of its variants, over and over. It is as though modern screenwriters were minded to kill off any lingering idea that comedy bears a logical connection to elegance: good riddance to Ernst Lubitsch.

More vexing is the case of Robert Downey, Jr., whose performance is conducted almost entirely in blackface. This is, to say the least, a controversial move, but Stiller and his team are wise to any accusations, carefully framing the insult in cooling ironies. First, this is Downey, the smartest actor on the block right now, never holding still long enough to warrant a charge of dramatic malice. Second, he is playing another actor, a blond Australian narcissist, and it is *his* decision to black up, by way of thespian dedication. ("I don't drop character until I done the DVD commentary," he says, adding later, "I don't read the script, the script reads me." He sounds like Harold Bloom discussing Shakespeare.) Third, his efforts, complete with deep bass outbursts of what he takes to be ethnically correct cursing ("Hot *damn!*"), are wit-

ROBERT RISKO

nessed and rebuked by a genuine black actor (Brandon T. Jackson) in the troop. The over-all effect is bizarre, daring you to be amused by something both brilliant and bristling with offense; if you sidle out at the end, feeling half guilty at what you just conspired in, then Stiller has trapped you precisely where he wants you. The one thing I am sure of, amid so much uncertainty, is that I wouldn't watch this movie sitting next to Spike Lee.

After the dazzle of the early scenes, something droops and flags in "Tropic Thunder." The British director is blown up by a land mine, leaving his stars to fend for themselves in the jungle, whereupon they are beset by real enemies—a horde of drug dealers—and forced to fight back. (Beneath the gags, that's a pretty hokey development, familiar from any fable of personal growth: the discovery of your inner, stronger self.) For a while, Tugg Speedman keeps believing that he is still in character, performing for hidden cameras, but that conceit, I noticed, was quietly dropped, as if the film had better things to do than fool around on the fault lines between fantasy and truth. So what are those better things? We know what kind of work the war epic, tucked inside the farce, was trying and failing to be, but what kind of outer shell did Ben Stiller and his fellow-farceurs have in mind? As a jab at the movie business, "Tropic Thunder" is flailing and unfocussed, hardly in the league of "The Player," and if you want an exposé of the combat movie, strewn with compromise and creative sacrifice, watch "Hearts of Darkness" (1991), about the making of "Apocalypse Now." The Stiller of "Dodgeball" left the genre of the sports melodrama in tatters, but we can safely assume that the war film, after this assault, will live to fight another day. All that is left, then, for "Tropic Thunder" to revel in is mania. The caterwauling of the characters and the nastiness (at once silly and bloody) of the special effects leave you feeling more embattled than entertained, yet no amount of gunfire and explosions in the final reel can give the film the guts of a proper action flick. It's every man for himself, in every sequence, as though Stiller needed to prove that movie stars—these few, these unhappy few, this band of bastards—were the opposite of noble warriors. If he wants to win a Crying Monkey Award, he'll have to do better than that.

After the assault of "Tropic Thunder," the new Claude Chabrol movie, "A Girl Cut in Two," looks impeccably calm and composed. Do not be deceived. This is Chabrol country, where looks are no guarantee of anything, and can easily kill. The girl of the title is a TV weather presenter called Gabrielle Deneige (Ludivine Sagnier). Though not always as pure as her snowy name, she is innocent enough to drift into the arms of two besmirching men, and end up split between them. There is Charles Saint-Denis (François Berléand), a respected author, decades her senior, who summons and savors her as he would a fine Burgundy, and then leaves her drained and distraught. Then there is Paul Gaudens (Benoît Magimel), heir to a chemicals fortune, and an unsavory compound of dandy, cad, and wacko; he has a jacket apparently woven from floral carpeting and a hair style borrowed from a British New Romantic band of the nineteen-eighties. Gabrielle is no fortune hunter, so what does she see in this pair?

In a way, that is not Chabrol's business. The heart has its reasons, the reasons drive us mad, and his task is to forge a style from the result. His trademarks are all there: the quick, elliptical scenes, the unfussy fades to black, and the pulse of interest that can bring a camera hastening smoothly to inspect the characters, up close and personal, as their feelings ignite—anger on Paul's face, as he sits with a drink, or despair on that of his mother (Caroline Silhol), as her immaculate manners start to crack. If anything, the older people seem to attract Chabrol more, despite his Charles-like fondness for young flesh; age has made them not wiser but more civilized and therefore, from his point of view, more corrupt. The director is seventy-eight now, with almost seventy films under his belt. He remains as committed as ever to his twin duties of scourge and hedonist, yet I can't help wishing that he would, just once, cast off his own good narrative manners—do away with the irritations of a film like "A Girl Cut in Two," which is never more than semi-plausible, and arrange his passions, as the elderly Buñuel did in "That Obscure Object of Desire," into shameless, surreal anagrams of wit and lust. We get a welcome glimpse of them, at the close of Chabrol's movie, when its title comes true: Gabrielle really is sawn in half, but only by a magician. The first cut, to her soul, was much the deeper. ♦

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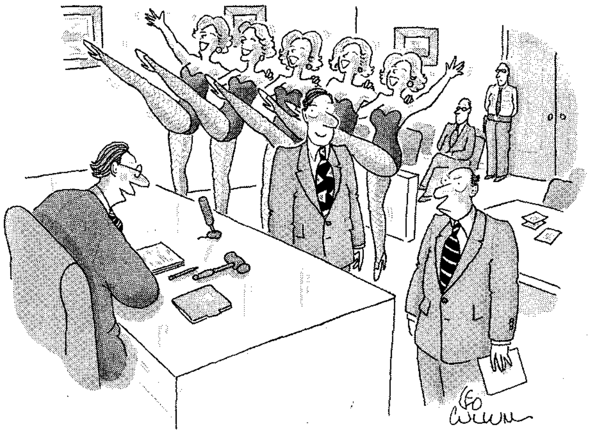
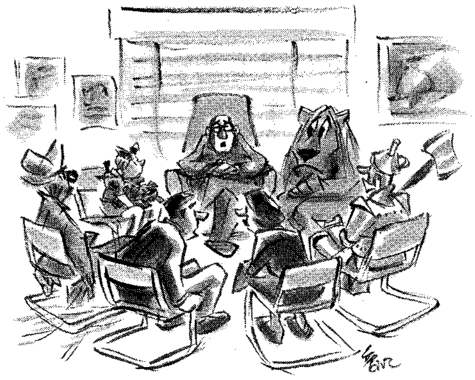
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, August 24th. Finalists in the August 4th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the September 8th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I know you have the law and the facts on your side, but I'm going with the dancing girls on this one."
Mark Nebrig, Charlotte, N.C.



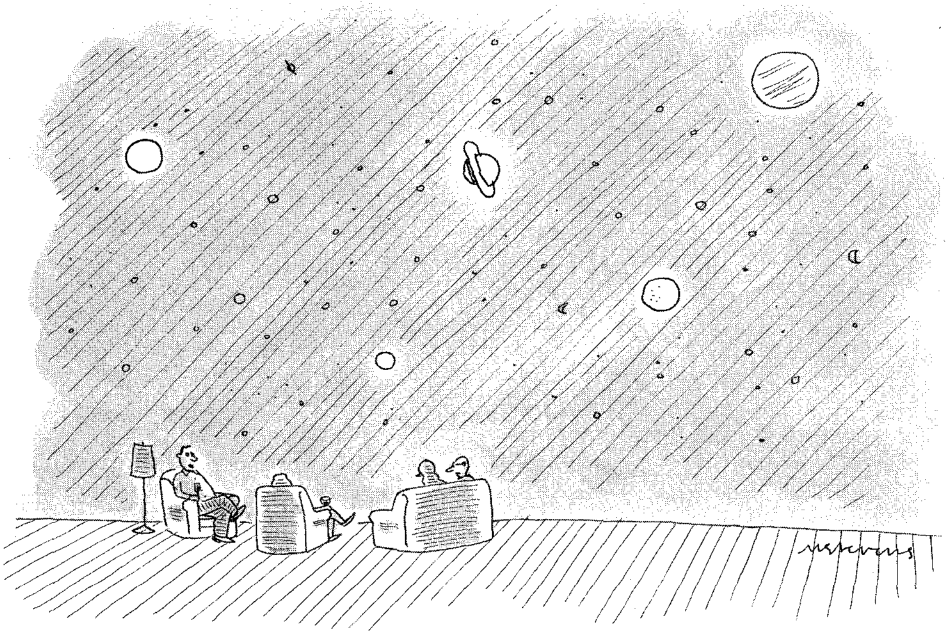
THE FINALISTS

"And my hourly fee is six hundred dollars. You're not in Kansas anymore."
Bill Craig, Ridgewood, N.J.

"If you adopt her, please understand that she comes with a lot of baggage."
Eileen Brady, Portland, Ore.

"Home—is there really no place like it? Who'd like to start?"
Whitworth Ferguson, Manassas, Va.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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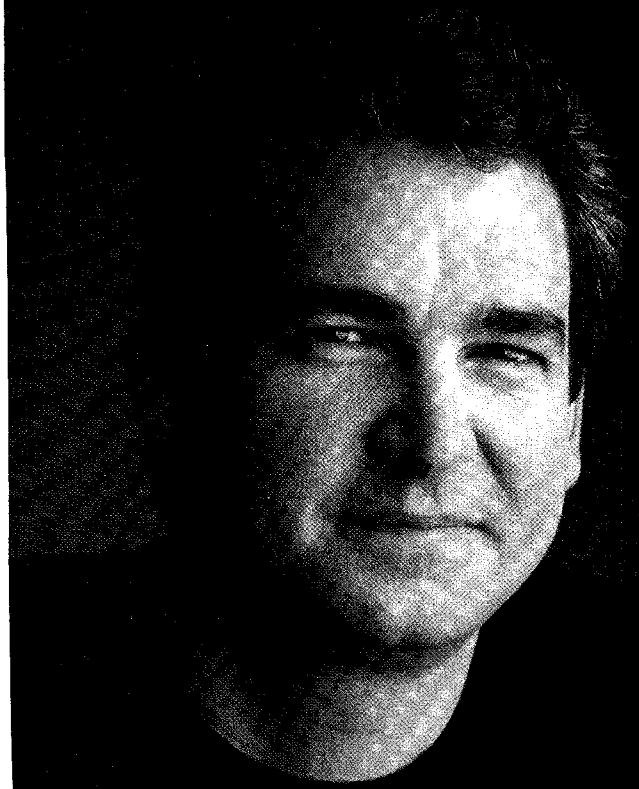

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